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# Cultural partners: an exchange of language and culture between adults

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**Cultural Partners:**

**An exchange of language and culture between adults**

**by**

**Colleen Marie Hovinga**

**A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty**

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**Major: English (Teaching English as a Second Language/Applied Linguistics)**

**Major Professor: Janet Anderson-Hsieh**

**Iowa State University**

**Ames, Iowa**

**1998**

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Graduate College  
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Colleen Marie Hovinga

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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This thesis is dedicated to Jeff, in appreciation of his love and support  
and  
To family and friends whose positive influences have helped me  
become the person I am today.

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## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

Cultural Partners is a language and culture exchange program developed to offer language support for adult English as a Second Language (ESL) students and positive intercultural interaction between ESL students and native English speaking volunteers. The ESL students were enrolled in an Adult Basic Education (ABE) open enrollment, non-credit ESL class, which is part of the continuing education program offered through North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC). Continuing education classes are funded by federal, state, and local tax dollars. NIACC is located in Mason City, the largest community in north Iowa with a population over 29,000 residents.

Students in the ESL class are immigrants and resident aliens from various countries, including Mexico, China, Vietnam, Russia, Poland, Korea, and Guatemala, who now live in northern Iowa. A variety of speaking abilities is also represented, from beginning to advanced proficiency levels.

The ESL curriculum in the ABE program focuses on survival skills, such as basic interpersonal communication skills, beginning English literacy, basic understanding of concepts related to money and time, United States history, and democratic government. Its purpose is to add to students' language and cultural knowledge without subtracting from the native language and customs that make them unique. The course curriculum provides opportunities to communicate in English in the classroom and to learn about the community and region in which the students live.

In the classroom environment, which encourages interaction and risk taking, students soon learn to communicate effectively with each other. However, outside of the classroom, students report feeling unsure of how to approach an English-speaking neighbor, how to start a conversation or how to respond when someone would address them in English. Students report their interaction with friends and acquaintances outside of the classroom is often in their native language.

Relationships and interaction in English with community members outside the classroom are necessary to gain a better understanding of the language, people, and communities in which one lives. Students reported a wide range in the number of times they spoke or heard English at their place of employment or in the community. Some students reported feeling ready to interact more with native English speakers, yet at the same time, felt they did not know enough about the community and its unwritten rules of social behavior. Although interaction in the community would help the students increase their awareness of language and culture in northern Iowa, they felt speaking to others in the community in English was difficult.

The difficulties my students reported were not surprising, considering that sociopolitical climate in Iowa is not always welcoming toward non-native English speakers, especially if the person's ability to communicate in English is limited. During each of the last four legislative sessions, bills have been introduced into the Iowa legislature to establish English as the official language of the state. According to Legislative Information Office personnel at the Iowa Capitol in Des Moines, bills were introduced in the 1994 and 1995 legislative sessions to declare English the



“official” language of Iowa and in 1996 and 1997 to declare English the “common” language of the state. As it stands today, most, if not all, public communication, both oral and written, is available only in English. Opposition to diversity has also been displayed on the local level. One local business owner and a school administrator made comments about how people “enjoy” the relatively homogeneous population we have. The diversity I observe in Mason City is not seen or enjoyed by some northern Iowans because, for whatever reason, their view of the world in which they live does not include others who are not like themselves.

This homogeneous world view is not valued by all, however. Several northern Iowa communities have created diversity teams that plan activities to promote appreciation for social, cultural, and physical differences that exist between people. Diversity teams provide a forum for discussing issues related to demographic change.

One factor that may contribute to the homogeneous world view “enjoyed” by some northern Iowans, is that, in this part of the state, non-native English speakers in the past have generally lived clustered in areas where they can find employment. They were not typically integrated into the larger community, unless they were married to a member of the community. Also, businesses that would hire non-native English speakers have typically been related to agriculture or industry, and they would often hire for only seasonal or temporary positions.

With low unemployment, employers are now hiring more non-native English speakers for permanent positions. Several human resource managers reported increases in the number of applicants who cannot complete applications without

some translation or who bring a translator with them to interview (North Iowa Human Resource Association unpublished survey, 1996). Despite communication challenges due to language, these employees are reported to be among the most dependable, hardworking, and loyal employees. Because of experiences like these, employers and community leaders have begun to realize the benefits of employing people whose native language is not English and new opportunities are opening for bilingual professionals who are fluent in English.

Conversation partnerships seemed like a potentially valuable tool which could help students increase their fluency and cultural knowledge outside the classroom, while at the same time offer native north lowans an opportunity to meet a neighbor and learn about another culture. Successful conversation partner program models in educational settings that were reviewed served as one cornerstone for the Cultural Partners program presented in this paper. The initial partnership program, NIACC Volunteer Conversation Partnerships, was offered in spring 1996. After a summer of research and development, the program was repeated in fall 1996. The name was changed to the Cultural Partnership program to better reflect the goals of the interaction between student and volunteer. During 1996, 9 ESL students and 13 native English-speaking volunteers participated. An ABE State Staff Development grant partially funded the initial research. NIACC provided partial administrative support and space to hold the training meetings. The researcher was responsible for developing and coordinating the programs.

The major goal of this project was to provide ESL language support through contact with people in our community who were interested in learning about another

culture and in helping their partners improve their ability to communicate in English. This type of partnership was developed as a tool to help students improve their English communication skills while they learned about cultural and social activities of members in the community. At the same time, the volunteer participants could learn about their own interpersonal communication styles, have cross-cultural experiences, and possibly feel they were helping other community members.

This thesis is a report of the Cultural Partners program. Chapter 2 reviews pertinent literature, provides overviews of model programs, and summarizes background information. Chapter 3 describes the Cultural Partners program, including the objectives, participants, activities, and administration of the program. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the benefits, challenges, and conclusions drawn from participant comments, journals, and researcher observations. Implications for future studies are also discussed. Chapter 5 makes recommendations for future programs.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review that follows includes published research and personal interviews that pertain to conversation partnerships. Topics discussed include the value of conversation partnerships, support for utilizing volunteers in learning programs, elements of successful programs, interviews with coordinators of conversation partnership programs, cultural knowledge, the nature of conversation, and a brief summary of the literature reviewed.

### **Value of Conversation Partnerships**

Adults need to feel a sense of belonging and have opportunities to socialize. When living in a new environment, they need to learn about the community in which they live in order to meet personal and family needs related to health, safety, social, and cultural issues. Learning this type of information requires interaction with others. When one's ability to communicate in the local language is limited, interacting with others and learning community information (or cultural knowledge) becomes more difficult.

As Schmidt and Frota suggested in 1986, it is commonly believed that interaction with native speakers enhances, but will not necessarily guarantee, language proficiency. It has been suggested that native and non-native speaker interactions facilitate comprehension in the target language, provide access to meaningful lexical forms, allow interlanguage hypothesis testing, and promote the development of strategies to help the learner overcome communication problems (Stoller, Hodges, & Kimbrough 1995; Pica, 1994; Duryee, Lanier, & Michel-Reyes, 1991; Brock, Crookes, Day, & Long, 1986). Interacting with a native-English

speaking partner may help language learners feel more secure, which may encourage them to take more risks in the target language.

Studies on the development of pragmatic competence have shown that interacting with native speakers is a beneficial way to develop pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence is the “knowledge required to determine what sentences mean when spoken in a certain way in a particular context” (Fraser, Rintell, & Walters, 1980). Language learners have reported native speaker interaction helps them improve in the target language (Duryee, Lanier, & Michel-Reyes, 1991). The fact that language learners *believe* that interactions with native speakers probably helps improve their level of proficiency at the same time. Partnership programs attempt to enhance language learning by creating an environment that allows learners to safely and comfortably interact with a native speaker.

The importance of “safe” environments should not be underestimated, as indicated by Leslie Hart’s research from the 1970’s on the evolution and function of the human brain. His work suggests that in order to learn, people need “conditions that foster the kind of thought, learning, and behavior we need to survive in today’s world” (Hart, 1975, p. 131). These conditions, which will be described below, include a safe environment that encourages and allows higher-level thinking.

Synthesizing knowledge drawn from many fields, Hart laid out a theory of how the brain functions. His work is the basis for some of today’s research on the inner workings of the human brain, which has brought about better understanding of the way people learn. Hart theorized that perceived threats to an individual,

whether physical, emotional, or social produce effects, which he called “downshifting” and “irising” (1975, p.130). Downshifting is a process through which the area in the human brain where an individual’s thoughts are processed changes from the more evolved gray matter (where complex thinking occurs) to the limbic area of the brain (where “fight or flight” decisions are made). Irising, the process of limiting the amount or clarity of perceptual input, occurs when the perceived threat is less intense. Both downshifting and irising can be brought on, according to Hart, by any degree of real or perceived threat. In order to allow an individual access to the areas of the brain where higher level thinking occurs, the individual must be in a “circumstance in which threat is absent” (130). Because language learning has an effect on an individual’s self identity, it may not be possible to completely eliminate the presence of threat as defined by Hart; however, language learning partnerships can minimize threat by providing a supportive partner with whom the learner can share a social experience.

Partnership or exchange programs are found in many settings because students, teachers, and administrators believe they contribute to learning on many levels. The effects of partnerships on short-term and long-term learning, student satisfaction, and enrollment have intuitively been assumed to be positive but have not been studied in great detail. However, *perceived* benefits to language learners can be grouped into the following categories: improvement of oral communication skills, general language support, tutoring on academic and language related topics, development of strategies to negotiate meaning in conversations, cross-cultural orientation, integration into school or larger community, personal development,

and social outlet (Stoller, Hodges, & Kimbrough, 1995; Levenson, 1995; Bentson & Mitchell, 1995; Duryee, Lanier, & Michel-Reyes, 1991) Because of the perceived benefits to participants from the linguistic, cultural, and social interaction, partnership programs may make an organization or educational program more attractive to learners (Stoller, Hodges, & Kimbrough, 1995). Stoller, Hodges and Kimbrough's (1995) journal article reports common beliefs surrounding conversation partner programs, defines several types of conversation partner programs, and reviews related literature.

Potential negative effects of failed partnerships and the limitations of successful partnerships have not been studied in detail. Anecdotal evidence suggests students whose partnerships fail to meet their expectations may experience a range of feelings from disappointment to frustration or anger, may leave the partnership program dissatisfied, stop attending class, or not refer others to the school. While personality conflicts could produce the same results, it is important to recognize that ineffective partnership programs may have damaging effects on learners, volunteers, teachers, and organizations.

Benefits to the native English speaking volunteers generally include a sense of helping a learner, learning about another culture, and meeting new people (Bentson & Mitchell, 1995; Stoller, Hodges, & Kimbrough, 1995). Benefits to the sponsoring organization include increased retention (First In the Nation in Education Newsletter, 1997). Other potential benefits will be looked at further in the analysis section of this paper.

Several varieties of conversation programs exist. For this study, the varieties are grouped into two main categories, conversation partnerships and language exchanges. Conversation partnerships typically involve a language learner interacting with a person who is a native or fluent speaker of the language studied. The focus is primarily on helping language learners improve their ability to communicate in a target language. Language exchanges involve partners who speak different native languages and who are each studying their partner's native language. The exchange allows partners to share their native language and also practice speaking in their partners' native language. Conversation partnerships and language exchanges can provide both an opportunity for language learners to use the target language informally and learn cultural knowledge in an environment built on mutual respect.

One basic assumption of this thesis is that effective partnership programs must promote cultural understanding and effective communication by all participants. Conversation partnerships do not *always* need to involve second language learning. Members of a community who come from different cultural backgrounds, are fluent in a common language, and interested in learning about the different culture, can form cultural partnerships.

For example, the Study Circles program, a project developed through the Topsfield Foundation, Inc. and sponsored in Iowa by the Iowa Civil Rights Commission, is an example of this type of partnership. Study Circles are "small-group, democratic, participatory discussions" which are created to help participants "form new interracial networks, gain a deeper understanding of others' perspectives



and concerns; discover common ground; and gain a greater desire and ability to work together on public problems” (Study Circles Resource Center, 1997).

Participant training, study groups, and on-going support are tools used in this type of program to develop understanding and improve communication. Training will be discussed further in both culture and volunteer sections of the literature review.

Language and cultural partnership programs have different names depending upon the goals of the program and the community in which the program operates, which can be defined as a school, business, town, or group of individuals. Common goals for these programs often include improving English communication skills, promoting personal respect and understanding, as well as increasing participants’ cultural awareness and understanding. Successful conversation programs can be found in community organizations, educational programs, and businesses around the country. Students and volunteers both receive the opportunity to learn about life in another culture and their partner’s experience within the community in which they live.

The Cultural Partners program described in this thesis involves a language learner and a volunteer or mentor. The words “volunteer” and “mentor” can be used interchangeably in this paper to refer to a “native language speaker who lives in the community and serves as a guide” (Marshall, 1989, p. 58).

### **Support for Utilizing Volunteers in ESL Programs**

Volunteers in an ESL program are valuable linguistic, cultural, and social resources for students. In a 1995 TESOL Annual Convention presentation entitled *Establishing a Volunteer Program for ESL Student Support*, Marilyn Katz Levenson

shared the following reasons as support for bringing volunteers into the ESL classroom. Interacting with a native speaker provides general language support, gives students the opportunity to improve oral communication skills and increase fluency in the local register, provides a cross-cultural orientation, and helps students become more integrated into the school and the larger community.

Vgotsky's 1962 work (cited in Richard-Amato, 1996) supports use of partnerships through his theory of a zone of proximal development, and his definition of language as a vehicle for intellectual development. The zone of proximal development suggests that language input at a level slightly beyond the skills a student can perform independently can support language development. Looking at language as a means of developing intellect suggests that second language learning reaches a level which goes beyond sounds, words, and basic communication into deeper levels of understanding. Conversations with a partner can provide access to language input within this zone and can allow negotiation of meaning that is at the student's level. Partners assist in language development through negotiation of meaning and through interaction with students on levels that are at or slightly higher than the student's current level.

Villa and Thousand (1995) encourage learning partnerships because they can help students develop problem-solving skills that will be important to their success in the twenty-first century. Benefits to students who learn through "partner learning systems" include academic progress, learning "positive social interaction skills," and increased self-esteem (p.175). Villa and Thousand speculated that the

interaction with a partner is more meaningful for students if the student feels safe with their partner.

The need for “safety” in interpersonal interactions may be the intersection of the work of Villa and Thousand, Hart (brain research), and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. Several SLA theories suggest an implicit understanding of this need and can be strengthened by drawing on work from other disciplines. One link, for example, is the theory of the “affective filter,” which controls the amount of input a learner can take in because of “affective” variables, including learner motivation and personality (Brown, 1987 & Scovel, 1988). When a person does not feel safe, they “downshift” into instinctive reactions, moving away from complex thinking. If psychological and social needs are met, the student will feel more at ease, which in turn lowers the student’s affective filter.

Another link is found in Schachter’s theory related to Selinker’s well-known theory of interlanguage development. Interlanguage refers to the progression of language development that takes place within an individual as one learns a second language. Interlanguage hypotheses are formed and tested by language learners as one acquires the “syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of the second language. In 1984, Schachter theorized that language processing time, the amount of time a learner requires after input in order to make use of it to modify the interlanguage hypothesis, may be reduced in meaningful, safe interactions.

### **Elements of Successful Programs**

Several key elements kept recurring in successful programs throughout readings, conference presentations, and interviews with coordinators of

conversation partnerships. This section discusses these common elements of volunteer programs, which include planning, recruiting, training, maintenance, and evaluation.

## **Planning**

In most programs, some type of organizational structure is developed before publicizing or recruiting begins. The program philosophy, guidelines, goals, and roles of participants are defined in advance and adapted as the program grows. A planning committee can guide program development and suggest methods to build necessary community and school support (Zajdel, 1993). Although committee planning requires more time, each committee member adds to the strength and diversity of the program's foundation. The collaboration of committee members may also provide a wider base of support within the organization, which is crucial to developing and maintaining a successful, long-term program (Villa & Thousand, 1996).

Guidelines and job descriptions for participants clarify expectations related to the program's purpose, participant's activities, qualifications, and amount of time involved. Developing guidelines for both students and volunteers ensures everyone involved understands the program's purpose and participants' roles.

The job description of the coordinator of a volunteer program typically includes organizing the program and coordinating all, or some aspects of contact with participants, including recruiting, interviewing, training, pairing partners, maintaining contact, planning activities, and evaluating program strengths and needs. Because the coordinator may be required to interact with staff, volunteers,

and students, she needs good interpersonal communication skills, must be able to quickly adapt to changes, have a clear idea of program goals and be able to identify the steps necessary for achieving them (McCurley & Lynch, 1989). The coordinator has a large influence on the program and how participants perceive it.

The language learners and native speakers are volunteer participants. Although many programs recruit volunteers to *help* the language learner, it is important to recognize all participants are volunteers and all partners benefit from the interaction. Benefits to native speakers and volunteer participants will be discussed further in the analysis section of this thesis. ESL students' participation and time are as valuable as the native English-speaking volunteers' contributions.

Program administrators develop the tools described above and other strategies for establishing and maintaining effective programs by observing similar programs, interviewing potential participants, and reading related literature. For example, *More Than a Native Speaker* (Snow, 1996), the *Talk Time Handbook* (Bentson & Mitchell, 1995), and *Culturally Speaking* (Genzel & Graves-Cummings, 1994) are valuable resources for administrators, coordinators, teachers and volunteers in a language program. After completing the planning stage, the new program is ready to begin recruiting participants.

### **Recruitment**

Participants can be recruited for the program from within the school, organization, or local community. Native speaker volunteers and language learners become aware of programs by word of mouth, flyers, and announcements made in classes, community groups, or public media such as newspapers, radio, and

television. Flyers may be posted in grocery stores, libraries, and schools. Religious organizations may announce the program in their weekly bulletins.

Once a potential volunteer has contacted the organization, an initial interview is a good method to gather information about the needs and interests of potential participants. This helps coordinators conduct an initial screening and make placement decisions. Student participants can be interviewed through the class, while native speaker volunteers may need to be formally interviewed if they are not known personally by the coordinator. Screening participants is an important step in partnership programs. Some volunteers may be interested in contributing to the program without becoming a partner. Others may have habits or motives that are unsuitable for one-on-one pairing with a language learning student. If a volunteer's motives are unclear, further interviewing or training may be necessary before making placement decisions.

People choose to volunteer for a variety of reasons. A general overview of positive volunteer motivators includes a desire to help, a social need, a sense of citizenship, cultural expansion, religious devotion, interest in the work of the organization, professional development, or a sense of responsibility (McCurley & Lynch, 1989; Bentson & Mitchell, 1995). Each volunteer comes to a program with his or her own unique motivators and needs, which may change over time. Because of increased volunteer opportunities with organizations and companies, volunteers may donate time to several organizations or may tire of a partnership program unless they feel it is rewarding. Successful program coordinators recognize the needs and motivations of volunteers in order to retain volunteers and

create an experience that is both rewarding for volunteers and beneficial for students (McCurley & Lynch, 1989; Green, 1984).

### **Orientation and Training**

Some type of orientation or training is an essential element observed in many conversation partnerships and language exchanges. A minimum of one 2-hour training session, designed to provide orientation to the program and meet other defined goals, is recommended. If training is provided, an attendance policy should be included in the guidelines. A handbook or set of guidelines is a necessary tool for overall program orientation, which can be reviewed with participants during the training session or individually with those who are unable to attend the training session.

Bringing together volunteers for a two-hour orientation meeting saves time and creates a valuable opportunity for the coordinator and participants to hear goals and share expectations. Beyond reviewing the program guidelines or handbook, the training activities described below can be offered before partnerships are established or during the period in which partners are meeting. Alternate training dates may be needed for volunteers who have time conflicts.

The content of the orientation should cover basic information about language learning. General guidelines about pronunciation goals and error correction are two very basic elements that can improve the quality of interactions between the native English speaker and ESL student (Snow, 1996). Explaining to partners that comprehensible speech is a key goal of both partnerships, and ESL instruction as a whole will prepare them for interaction with their partner. Pronunciation that is clear

and understandable, although accented, will be acceptable for many students. Language learners may ask their partner to correct every pronunciation mistake. Partners will be able to discuss topics in greater detail if they don't stop to focus on every error. Native English speakers may also need to be aware that "correct" pronunciation of English will vary.

A brief explanation of the process of fossilization may be beneficial to volunteers. Some errors made by language learners may be the result of patterns that have become so ingrained into the learners speech that the error will remain part of normal speech for that person. When language learners appear to stop learning at a point that is not native-like pronunciation, fossilization may be permanent (Selinker and Lamendella, 1979).

While some "errors" may be fossilized, there are some errors that volunteers should not overlook. Don Snow (1996), in *More Than a Native Speaker*, advises that volunteers correct errors that are rude, ignorant, or offensive; occur repeatedly as a frequent pattern; or reflect a misunderstanding of the topic. Correction of errors can be a necessary part of language learning. However, if the language learner perceives corrective feedback in a negative way, it will be a weak aid to language acquisition or movement through an interlanguage (Brock, 1986). A positive or negative perception of the input can only be defined by the learner within the context in which the input was received (Brock, 1986). Close interpersonal interaction with a native speaker of the target language may make even negatively perceived corrective feedback more available to be used by the learner.



Moving beyond this basic orientation to second language acquisition, native English volunteer training can focus on challenges caused by problems with interpersonal communication. Kristin Juffer (1993), in "The first step in cross-cultural orientation: defining the problem," recommends training activities which focus on the following: "Person-to-person communication," "culturally determined cognitive meaning . . . and how they are matched or mismatched" in culturally diverse settings, understanding cultural "social motivators, mores, values, and expectations," the "concept of role ambiguity," and group or individual activities which encourage participants to "explore communication and culture" (Juffer, 1993, pp. 209-10).

Juffer's work also helps to define student training, which is also an important element of conversation partnerships. Student training can effectively be combined with language classes to provide on-going training and support. Student training can take place individually, in group training sessions, and within the ESL class. Reviewing guidelines, setting goals, and providing cultural orientation are methods of ESL training which have been observed.

According to Juffer, cultural orientation training needs to include orientation to the physical environment, survival language, facts about customs, traditions, and the history of the area and personal growth activities, such as nutrition, time management, self awareness, relaxation or stress-reduction exercises. This type of orientation prepares students for the "growth experience" (1993, p. 214) which is created by learning while immersed in an environment where one is a non-native speaker of the local common language.

Training provides benefits to all participants, the partnership program, and the community where programs are offered. It does this by providing an orientation to program goals and objectives, raising participants' cultural awareness, teaching volunteers basic information about the process of learning a second language, and providing a structured, safe environment for participants to examine ways in which their beliefs and attitudes shape actions toward other members of the community (Bennett, 1993, p. 122). Participants and staff come to understand, agree upon, and work toward common goals. Once these preparatory training activities are complete, the coordinator's efforts then shift to maintaining successful partnerships.

### **Maintenance**

Partners are introduced either during an orientation training session, series of sessions, or after training is completed, depending upon the program. The rationale for the choice of two individuals for a partnership is usually based upon information obtained on volunteer and student information sheets or from interviews.

Partnerships between two individuals or small groups are determined from the information sheets, teacher input, and on an as-needed basis.

Programs vary in the amount of structure they provide for meetings and topics. High school partnerships are often set up for specific times each week during the school day, while college and workplace programs need more flexibility for participants to negotiate meeting times, places, and topics.

Successful programs provide access to support during the partnership. Volunteer support can include personal contacts, phone calls, letters, additional training sessions, or study groups. Volunteer receptions, luncheons, thank-you

notes, and certificates show volunteers their time is appreciated and provide recognition for their contribution. Student-written thank-you notes to their partners are a way students have shown appreciation and friendship.

Record keeping is important to programs for accountability and future funding (Levenson, 1996). This is accomplished through simple monthly time sheets and reflective journaling. A half-sheet of paper with dates and lines for recording volunteer hours can serve as a time sheet. Spiral bound notebooks or loose-leaf paper and folders can function as participant journals. Journals allow participants to reflect, help the coordinator see ways the program does or does not meet its goals and provide insight into areas needing improvement. Journals and monthly time sheets can be used to demonstrate the value of the program to the organization's administration, and to support grant applications.

Publicity is important to long-term success of partnership programs. As more people become familiar with the program and its goals, word of mouth referrals may increase the number of participants. Volunteers may be willing and able to help with publicity. Writing a news release or feature story could be a valuable service learning project for school newspapers or technical writing and communication skills classes. A motivated short-term volunteer may enjoy writing an article for a newsletter or newspaper. Publicity also provides a way to acknowledge volunteers publicly. Volunteers who are motivated by extrinsic rewards may feel honored to be asked to give an interview to local news media or to be nominated for a local, state, or national award. There are many avenues available to publicize partnership

programs. Participant meetings, participant support, record keeping, and publicity are important components of maintaining successful partnerships.

### **Evaluation**

Evaluation is a method used to effectively identify the changing needs of participants. Some reasons for using evaluation as a tool for program improvement include generating information about results, reducing the need for "trial and error activity," facilitating and ensuring a program develops toward its goals, and discovering unexpected positive and negative results that could otherwise go unnoticed (Alamprese, 1984, p. 3). There are two layers of evaluations that can provide valuable information for programs: personnel and program.

The personnel of partnership programs, paid and unpaid, include coordinators, administrative support staff, native-English speaking volunteers, and students. Formal or informal personnel evaluations can be used as deemed appropriate by the coordinator or planning committee.

At a program level, inviting personnel feedback and having a plan to utilize feedback allow for continuous growth and improvement. In-progress and end of program evaluations can also be formal or informal. Participant comments and questions during training sessions and throughout the program can provide valuable suggestions. Having a means of anonymously sharing negative comments may invite greater openness. Comment cards and evaluation forms are a few tools used by volunteer conversation programs.

Between programs, time should be allowed to review evaluations and implement necessary changes. Evaluation meetings should involve planning-

committee members, the coordinator, and other participants in a program review designed to develop and incorporate changes. Evaluations provide a way to gain feedback and participant suggestions to strengthen the program.

The key elements described above, including planning, recruiting, training, maintenance, and evaluation were developed through observation, readings, information gleaned from conference presentations, and interviews with three program coordinators. In the next section, additional information gleaned from these interviews will be summarized.

### **Interviews with Coordinators**

Three model programs helped to shape the development of Cultural Partners. These programs were the Intensive English and Orientation Program at Iowa State University, Tandem Language Program at the University of Minnesota, and Conversation Partners at Davenport West High School, Davenport, Iowa. Formal and informal interviews, conducted with program coordinators, are detailed below.

#### **Intensive English and Orientation Program**

The Intensive English and Orientation Program (IEOP) at Iowa State University (ISU) has a model cultural partnership program for helping non-native English speakers interact with others in the general university community. Students enrolled in the IEOP program can participate in conversation groups, which consist of one native English speaking student and several non-native English speaking students. The program provides an opportunity for international students to use the English informally with a native English speaking student at ISU.

According to Lucy Zollner, former IEOP Conversation Group coordinator, the native English speaker is paid a small amount to lead a group of language learners for casual conversation one hour each week during the semester (1996). Leaders receive training and support from the Conversation Group coordinator. IEOP students practice conversational English with native English speakers outside of their IEOP classes, while learning from Iowa State University students about life at ISU, Ames, and the United States. Discussion topics include classes, the school community, families, friends and hobbies. Students meet in their homes and dormitories, in the Memorial Union, the library and other public places, such as local restaurants and art galleries. Language learners and native English speaking students both learn about life in another culture and their partners' experiences within the community where each group member was raised.

### **Tandem Language Program**

Another university partnership program that shaped the development of this research was the Tandem Language Program at the University of Minnesota (UM). The Tandem Program is a Language Partnership program in which both volunteer participants are studying a second language (Peterson, 1995). Because each partner speaks a different native language and each partner is studying the language their partner speaks natively, both partners take turns in the role of tutor and student. Equal time is devoted to each language. The program has approximately 60 students each semester. Participants are recruited in classes at the university. Other participants include UM staff and members of the community.

Participants have an orientation meeting designed to make the Tandem meetings more successful. The orientation materials include cultural awareness activities, cultural sensitivity examples, language teaching and learning activities, such as reviewing and using vocabulary in context, tape recording sessions, telling folk tales in one language and retelling it in the other language, and discussing specific conversation topics from a list the program provides. These materials are intended to make Tandem meetings more successful by increasing language learners' awareness of the culture in which they live, offering useful suggestions for participants, and addressing potential problems before they arise (Peterson, 1995). After the initial orientation meeting, arrangements are determined between the partners. The organization of the program is very loosely structured in order to allow participants greater flexibility. A coordinator is available for support as needed.

### **Conversation Partners**

The third program having influence on this research was Conversation Partners at Davenport West High School. This volunteer language partnership program was established to help Vietnamese and Spanish students in the ESL program learn to speak English and to promote social growth and acceptance within the school. Conversation Partners also encourages cross-cultural exchange between immigrant or visiting foreign students and native English-speaking students who have had little opportunity to know people from other cultures (Hailey, 1995). The school's administration supports the program and promotes it within the community.

The program is based on four values—sharing, listening, equality, and respect. High school student participants interact as peers providing greater variety and social support than possible between a teacher and learner. Twenty to forty-minute meetings are scheduled during a study hall or ESL class.

Adult mentors and student coordinators work with participating students and the school's administration. All students receive orientation, training, and support from mentors, advisors, and student coordinators. The initial orientation is designed to establish the framework of the program and build a relationship between partners. The initial interaction between partners occurs at this meeting. At a midterm ongoing training session, partners review the learnings and benefits of their meetings, share problems that they have experienced, and discuss ways to improve the partnership and the program in the future.

Interviews with coordinators of these model programs provided insights into a variety of successful programs that are currently operating in educational settings. Conference presentations by program coordinators from other educational institutions, as well as workplace and community based programs also provided insights into elements of successful programs.

### **Culture**

Students receive both ESL instruction and practice using new sounds and vocabulary in the classroom. However, sounds and word meaning are only one aspect of communication. Everyday activities, cultural norms, and acceptable behaviors differ between people of differing cultural backgrounds. These social and cultural differences affect the meaning associated with sounds and words of a



language. Understanding cultural differences is challenging because it is “psychologically intense” (Paige, 1993, p. 3), yet this type of understanding is essential to people who move to a new environment and to those who are experiencing changes in the demographics of their neighborhoods and communities. The reasons for this become clear when we establish a definition of culture and look at the individual within a cultural system.

A general anthropology textbook definition of culture is the set of rules, or standards, shared by members of a society, which when acted upon by members, produces behavior that falls within a range of variation that members consider proper and acceptable (Haviland, 1990, p. 30). Because students’ cultures often have different norms of acceptable behavior, the beliefs of what is normal and acceptable can vary, greatly at times, from others in the community in which they currently reside. Language attitudes and cultural expectations both play a role in society, which impacts “not only how people perceive others, but how they behave toward them.” Attitude is described as a “learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object” (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975, p. 10). “Wherever multicultural settings exist, language attitudes . . . play an integral social role, not only in reflecting intergroup relations, but also in mediating and determining them” (Giles, Hewstone, & Ball, 1983, p. 95). Native English speakers in a community will react toward a non-native English speaker in ways based upon their attitudes and expectations, and vice versa.

While a range of expected attitudes may be known, it is impossible, and inappropriate, for language instructors to predict attitudes of students or community

members because there are so many individual variables that shape attitudes. Language and cultural knowledge are “part of our individual social identity” (Finegan, 1994, p. 468). Both long-time community members who perceive changes in their neighborhood or society *and* new resident ESL students who are living in an unfamiliar cultural environment feel the effects of equally “psychologically intense” (Paige, 1993, p. 3) cultural changes. However, there will be differences between group members’ perceptions of the experience due to their identification with a social group.

All community members are affected by demographic change. When cultural differences between groups are great, demographic changes are viewed more positively if community members are willing to accept and respect each other and allow some degree of acculturation, “the process of coming to know and accept the roles, norms, and values of a culture different from one’s own” (Landis & Bhagat, 1996, p. 9).

Language learning students allow a degree of acculturation through the process of learning a second language. Communicating in a second language changes the individual’s self-perception and view of the world. In the language classroom, the teacher can introduce students to linguistic and cultural knowledge, which may in turn affect how students perceive and are perceived by others. There is little doubt that an ESL classroom offers linguistic knowledge. Whether or not to teach culture and which cultures to teach are choices ESL teachers knowingly or unknowingly make.

A useful cultural distinction for language teachers is the difference between Culture with a capital "C" and culture with a small "c." Culture with a capital "C" is made up of "geographic, historic, and aesthetic components," while everyday cultural patterns are considered culture with a small "c" (Lafayette, 1978, p 2.) Both of these components are important for language learners. It is easier for teachers to expose learners to Culture with a capital "C" in the classroom than it is to bring a variety of everyday cultural knowledge, beyond the teacher's own experiences, into the language classroom. Students need cultural knowledge in order to become more familiar with unwritten rules of the community and to make informed choices when they interact with other community members (Paige & Martin, 1993).

This importance of culture with a small "c" becomes even more relevant when considering culture as a system made up of individuals who behave in similar ways. Allport (1958) suggested that humans are "drawn to others who share their own beliefs, customs and values." People who "disagree, behave unpredictably, and speak" differently can be viewed as intimidating or even repulsive. (Morain, 1978, p 2). While there is room for variation within expected behaviors, the unpredictable nature of some behaviors, which members of one culture may define as normal aspects of everyday life, often can be viewed as unusual, obscene or intimidating when observed by members of other cultural systems. Without cultural knowledge, an ESL student may find his or her opportunities to interact with native speakers limited, regardless of the student's ability to speak in the language. While some cultural behaviors expected by community members can be brought into the classroom with demonstrations or volunteer interactions with students during class

time, a more authentic way to help students learn about culture is through structured interaction within the community. Partnerships can provide this structured interaction.

Community can be broadly defined as a school, business, town, or other group of individuals. Since community can consist of various groups of individuals, the many layers of a language learner's community can be described as a series of four concentric circles (Marshall, 1989, p. 54) as shown in Figure 2.1.

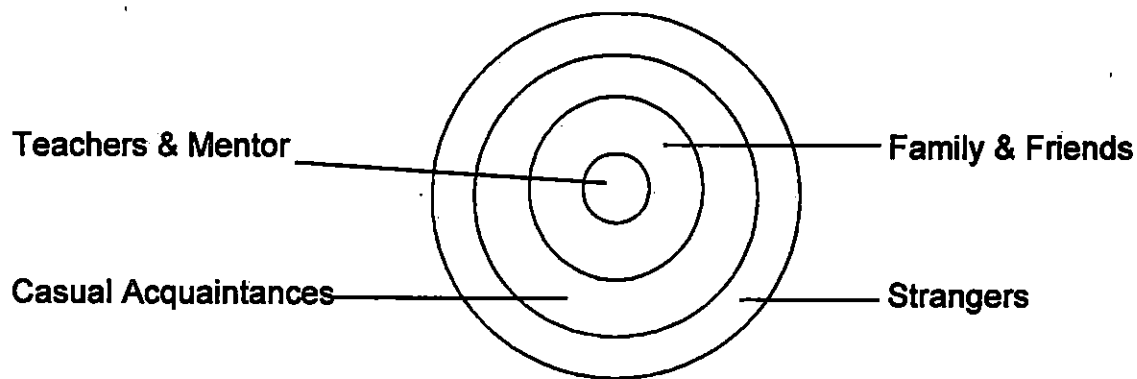


Figure 2.1. Concentric Circles of Community

The innermost circle of Figure 2.1 consists of teachers and mentors who have a close relationship with the student. Family and friends make up the next circle of basic support in the community. The third ring consists of a network of regular, casual acquaintances while the outermost ring is made of strangers from the larger community, such as a school or the town.

Strangers provide an opportunity to reach out and use the target language in new ways. However, if students do not know how to interact with people in the

outer circles, their ability to use language in new ways will be limited to the patterns and experiences they encounter with teachers and family. One less intimidating way to begin to reach out of the innermost circles and learn about another culture is by working closely with a trusted mentor, through either informal arrangements or organized partnership programs. Informal mentoring relationships and organized partnerships, based on mutual respect, can increase students' access to native speakers' culture by increasing opportunities for conversation with native speakers.

### **Conversation**

The focus of volunteer activity in partnership programs is conversation, a purposeful activity that occurs within a social and cultural context (Slade & Gardener, 1993). Language is a social "tool for doing things" (Finegan, 1994, p. 333). In this section, the role of conversation in society will be discussed to clarify its importance to language learners.

In defining a new model for studying communication, Higgins (1981) describes the process of making meaning through conversation as a "communication game." Communication is a social action in which participants consider the knowledge and attitudes of the person they are interacting with in an effort to achieve a "shared reality" (Higgins, 1992, p.111). Grice's (1975) cooperative principles, in which communicators strive to interact with appropriate quantity, relevance, manner, and quality of information, also suggest that conversants take others into account when choosing words to share information or interact with others.

Research has shown that ESL students have trouble with these because the reasons for having a conversation and the rules that govern conversations may vary tremendously between speakers of two different languages. Native English speakers have natural rules of conversation but are often unaware of them. These unwritten rules of conversation include "take turns at speaking, answer questions, mark the beginning and end of conversation, and make corrections when they are needed" (Finegan, 1994, p. 345). These "rules" (Haliday, 1985) are norms that vary between cultures. Because there can be differences in expected or polite behavior across cultures and languages, non-native English speakers who follow the "rules" of their own language and culture may appear rude or uninterested. They may misunderstand the intentions of members of English-speaking cultures within the United States or around the world with whom they have a conversation in English.

Non-verbal messages can also have a strong impact on interpersonal and intercultural communication. Variations in norms of appropriate or polite behavior may result in one party misinterpreting the intent of nonverbal signals (Finegan, 1994). Misinterpretations of non-verbal messages and the unwritten rules of conversation can interfere with effective interaction and lead to fewer opportunities for casual conversation.

Another very important consideration in conversation between native English speakers and non-native speakers of English is the idea of comprehensible input. Conversation can be meaningless, unless it is at a level which is comprehensible to the language learner or meaning can be determined through non-verbal messages and contextual clues. According to Krashen's Monitor Model, "a second language is

acquired through processing comprehensible input, language that is read or heard *and understood*" (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1994, p. 242). In order for input to become data used in development of second language skills, learners must perceive it at a level they can process and understand.

One belief on which partnership programs are founded is that volunteer partners help students acquire linguistic skills and knowledge of "unwritten" rules by providing access to native speaker input at a level the learner can understand and the opportunity to negotiate meaning in a safe interaction when communication breaks down. A goal of conversation partnership programs, as opposed to tutoring partnerships, is to encourage conversation between partners that is natural, spontaneous, and free from instructional qualities and domination by either partner, especially with more advanced language learners. As in casual interaction outside of partnerships, the conversations have a focus that can change as the conversation flows.

Partnerships support an ESL student's ability to converse with others in several ways. It provides a framework for students to begin learning ways of interacting which native speakers consider appropriate in interpersonal communication. Partners can provide cultural background information and an opportunity to negotiate meaning in the target language. Also, since American English speech is rapid and reduced in informal settings, interaction with a partner at a slightly slower than normal pace may help the student better understand spoken English, which increases the amount of input that is comprehensible to the language learner.

### **Literature Summary**

Students, volunteers, the sponsoring organization, and communities in which programs take place perceive partnership programs to be beneficial. Potential benefits include increasing participants' language and cultural knowledge, providing a social outlet, offering participants an opportunity for personal development, and increasing retention.

After examining perceived value of conversation partnership programs, support for the use of volunteers in a language program was discussed. Utilizing volunteers in an ESL program is a way to offer students more linguistic, cultural, and social knowledge than an instructor alone can provide. Through interviews with program coordinators and volunteer literature, an overview of several existing types of programs revealed insights into elements and strategies found in successful programs. Conversation programs take time, money, and the commitment of many participants. Planning, recruiting, training, maintenance, and evaluation are key elements of successful programs.

Conversation partnerships are based on the premise that student learning can be furthered through conversation. It is a tool that helps learners acquire language and cultural knowledge in a social context. Students studying a second language should be able to receive input at a level that is comprehensible to them and provide the opportunity for negotiation when communication breaks down. Students can learn "unwritten rules" of conversation, as well as cultural knowledge through close interpersonal interaction with a native English-speaking partner. Because cultural roles and expectations vary within and between cultures,



partnership programs offer valuable cultural learnings by bringing together people from diverse cultural backgrounds and supporting interaction through training and activities that are designed to promote mutual respect.

Existing partnership programs and literature on conversation partnerships were resources that shaped the development of Cultural Partners. The suggestions and ideas formed a solid foundation on which to build this program.

### **CHAPTER 3. DEVELOPMENT AND DESCRIPTION OF THE CULTURAL PARTNERS PROGRAM**

In this chapter, the development and key elements of the Cultural Partners Program will be presented. After a brief overview, the goals of the program will be described, and the development process, which includes each of the key elements described in the literature review, will be described.

#### **Planning**

In November 1995, students in the ABE English as a Second Language class, a federally-funded program offered through North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC), expressed an interest in having more interaction with native-English speaking members from the Mason City community. A conversation partnership program seemed a valid way to provide a structured interaction that could build students' confidence in their ability to speak English, while helping them learn social and cultural knowledge. This knowledge could lead to further involvement with members of the community.

Over the next four months, similar programs were reviewed, published research was reviewed, conference presentations related to conversation partnerships were attended, and initial development began. The ABE Coordinator, members of the researcher's Iowa State University Program of Study committee, and the researcher contributed to planning and development. A pilot program, Conversation Partnerships, was developed and tested.

The pilot Conversation Partnership program was held during the spring 1996 semester. Volunteers were recruited through a study lab, the school newspaper, and a newsletter announcement. Other potential partners were recruited through an announcement in psychology and Spanish classes. In all, six partnerships

successfully met throughout the spring program. Seven other ESL students were interested in having a partner but were unable to participate because of the limited number of volunteers or because they started the class after the program began because this ABE class allows students to enroll at any time.

The pilot program was evaluated at the end of its third month and offered again in the fall of 1996 as the Cultural Partners Program. Recruiting volunteers from students, faculty, and staff at NIACC began on the first day of the fall semester. Volunteers were again recruited through the school newspaper, staff memos, and in-class announcements. Two volunteer training sessions were planned but busy or conflicting schedules prevented all but three participants from attending. Most of the orientation and training occurred in individual meetings with the coordinator.

This research was originally designed to focus on the effect of volunteer training on attitudes toward non-native speakers of English. However, since only a few volunteers were able to attend the formal training session, the focus of this study became to describe the development of the partnership program and examine the benefits and challenges for participants. The overall goals of the program were not altered as a result of this change in focus.

Common goals give participants a clearer understanding of the purpose of the activities and the scope of the program. Defining goals and objectives is a way to visualize outcomes. The goals of the program were defined on many levels, including student, volunteer, teacher, research, school, and community levels.

Cultural Partners was designed as a tool to help students increase their level of fluency in English by interacting closely with a native speaker. This native speaker would be a community resource for the student partner. Cultural Partners

was designed as a way to connect classroom to community experiences for students.

Cultural Partners also offered a means for the native-English speaking volunteer to gain greater cultural awareness and develop intercultural communication skills through close, personal interaction with someone from a different cultural background. The training session and discussions were intended to help them increase awareness of their own communication style and improve their interpersonal communication skills, at least in intercultural communications, with non-native English speakers. The volunteers could gain personal satisfaction from helping another community member.

For the ESL teacher, the increased student contact with native language speakers outside the classroom could provide ideas for in-class activities. The program was a potential way to bring additional meaningful discussions into the classroom. Also, by providing an overview of existing conversation partnership programs and describing the Cultural Partners program process and results, the research was intended to provide guidance to other ABE teachers, ESL teachers, coordinators, school administrators, and anyone else interested in creating or maintaining similar programs. Another program level goal for NIACC was that Cultural Partners contribute to efforts to meet a strategic goal of increasing effectiveness of the college in preparing students for life in the global society by offering a structured intercultural experience to employees and students.

Because all the participants reside in northern Iowa, another goal of the program was to increase awareness of cultural diversity and to promote mutual respect for differences within the community. The program could provide a framework through which intercultural communication could begin between people who might not have otherwise had the opportunity to meet.

## **Recruitment**

### **Students**

In class, the teacher/researcher told the ESL students about the volunteer program. Students who expressed an interest were asked to talk about and write goals or reasons for participation in a partnership. Writing goals would make their reasons for participating clearer to themselves, their partner, and the program coordinator. Other student information was gathered through an information sheet (Appendix B), class registration data, and informal teacher observations.

In their goals, students expressed a desire to “talk better,” “improve pronunciation” and be better understood so they wouldn’t “get nervous when (they) try to speak.” One student stated a desire to learn “how to introduce (myself) to the people.” Students’ expectations were very high and at times were even unrealistic. Students also hoped the program would help them learn how to write sentences and to use past and future tenses more clearly. One student hoped to learn “everything.”

Students completed an initial self-assessment form designed for the program (Appendix A). The self-assessment form was designed to relate to student goals and “emphasize real-world human communication” (Gardner, 1996, p.19). Students were asked to rate the importance of each of twelve statements by marking a five-point scale. After reading or listening to statements such as “I can talk with a doctor or nurse in English about my health” or “I speak English comfortably at work,” students marked their responses, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The assessment focused on day-to-day communication in English at work, and

places around the community, such as the grocery store, restaurant, and doctor's office. One statement about their attitudes toward and reasons for learning English was included; "Speaking English is important to me." The same form was distributed at the end of the program to provide insights into students' own perceptions of their English communication abilities.

Instructors or administrators referred three NIACC international students, who spoke a native language other than English, to the program. For two of these students, their reasons for attending the ESL class orientation were not initially clear since they were quite fluent. After a few minutes of talking with them, it became clear they were looking for tutors. The students were disappointed when they learned the partnership program was designed to provide informal conversation, not tutoring on specific subjects. They chose not to participate. This confusion could have been avoided had the issue of non-native English speaking NIACC student involvement in the program been discussed before the students came to the ABE classroom.

### **Mentors**

Initially, it was challenging to find English speaking volunteers. This was one new program among many volunteer opportunities and other activities that compete for people's time. Volunteers were recruited at NIACC and in the community through the school newsletter, *NIACC Notes*, church bulletins, and announcements. Announcements made by the instructor, in Spanish and psychology classes, attracted several education and language students. Interested volunteers were asked to complete an information sheet to gather information about languages

spoken, interests, and times available (Appendix C). Potential volunteers were interviewed individually by the coordinator in order to make placement and screening decisions. Initially, a formal screening method was not developed because all participants were known personally by planning committee members. Recommendations for screening, including qualities to look for in a potential volunteer, have been developed for future programs and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Description of Participants**

The students and mentors who participated in the program were from various countries, including Mexico, China, Vietnam, Russia, Poland, Korea, Guatemala, Croatia, and the United States. In the following description of participants, random names were chosen to protect the identities of participants.

#### **Students**

Initially, the student participants came from a wide range of backgrounds. Demographic information was gathered through class registration records and informal interviews. As Table 3.1 shows, the different cultures, ages, and occupations created quite a cultural collage in the ESL classroom.

Rosa was in her middle twenties. She is a single Mexican woman who had lived in Mason City for over 4 years. She works on contract for a hatchery as a chicken sexor. She enjoys physical activities such as lifting weights and running, and reading in her native language. Her goals include learning how to start a conversation and how to express herself more clearly. During the spring, she met with Lisa. Her partnership meetings in the fall with Joan were not regular.

Table 3.1 Student Demographic Information.

ID	Native Language	Country of Birth	Age Group	Place of Employment	Marital Status	Sem.	Partner
Rosa	Spanish	Mexico	A	Hatchery	S	S	Lisa
Ana	Spanish	Mexico	A	Not employed	M	F	Deanna/Joan
Samuel	Spanish	Mexico	A	Hatchery	S	S	Cathy
					M	F	Tom
Maria	Spanish	Mexico	A	Hatchery	S	S	Mike
Luis	Spanish	Mexico	C	Hatchery	M	S	Jodi
						F	Pam/Lynne
Teresa	Spanish	Mexico	B	Not employed	M	S	Mike
						F	Pam/Lynne
Nho	Vietnamese	Vietnam	B	Manufacturer	M	F	Cathy
Eva	Polish	Poland	B	Not employed	M	S	Jessica
						F	Julie
Natasha	Russian	Russia	B	Not employed	E	F	Pat
							Michelle

Key      Age    A = 18-24   B = 25-35   C = 35+  
Semester   S=Spring   F=Fall      B=Both

Ana was about 20 years old and had lived in Mason City for about 6 months. She and her husband Samuel are from Mexico and both participated in a partnership, with different partners. Ana is not employed outside the home. She enjoys volleyball and walking. Ana met with Pam and Lynne during the fall. In the Spring of 1997, shortly before their first child was born, Ana and Samuel returned to Mexico so the child would grow up hearing and speaking Spanish as its native language.

Samuel was in his middle twenties, had lived in Mason City for 2 years, and was employed on contract with a hatchery as a poultry sexor. His spring semester conversation partner, Tom, did not have a flexible schedule so they were unable to meet regularly. During the first partnership program, he was engaged to be married. He returned to Mexico for his wedding in the summer. In the fall partnership program, he participated in an exchange partnership with Luis and Mike, while his wife met with a different partner.



Maria was about 20 years old. She is a single Mexican woman who had lived in Mason City and Texas for 2 years. She is employed on contract with a hatchery as a poultry sexor. She enjoys basketball, swimming and shopping. She wants to understand spoken English better. In the spring, Maria met with Jodi but was living in Texas for most of the fall program.

Luis was in his middle thirties, was born in Mexico, married to Teresa, and employed on contract as a chicken sexor. He had lived in Mason City for 2 years. He enjoys jogging and sports, and wanted to learn "how to introduce (himself to) people." In the spring, he and his wife met with Pam and Lynne in a group partnership. During the fall program, he and his friend Samuel met together with Mike.

Teresa was in her late twenties, married to Luis, and had lived in Mason City for 8 months. She was not employed outside the home and did not speak English before marrying Luis and moving from Mexico to the U.S. She enjoys cooking, walking, and talking with friends and family. In the fall, she was unable to meet regularly with Ana and their partner, Cathy. She hoped to learn to "introduce (herself to) people" and to learn "everything."

Nho was in her late twenties, was born in Vietnam, and has lived in the Midwest for 2 years. She married a U. S. citizen and, at the time of the program, had lived in Mason City for 6 months. She is employed by a local manufacturer. She met with Jessica during the fall program.

Eva was in her early thirties, married to a U. S. citizen, has one child, and has lived in Mason City for 3 years. She enjoys books, movies, knitting, and basketball. She returns to Poland at least once a year to visit family and friends. Her goals include speaking more clearly and "meeting more nice people." During

the spring, she met with Julie. In the fall, her partner, Pat, was only able to meet with her once.

Natasha was in her late twenties. She came to Iowa on a fiancé petition by a U.S. citizen. She returned to Russia when she and her fiancé decided not to marry. She enjoys reading, watching television, and listening to music. She was partnered with Michelle while she lived in the U.S. Her goal was to improve her English.

The ESL class, which all of the students were attending during the Cultural Partners program, has an open-enrollment policy. Students are able to enter the class at any time during the year. Other students who began after the program was in progress were interested in having partners, but there were not enough trained or participating mentors.

### **Mentors**

The native English-speaking volunteers brought a variety of backgrounds, interests, and experiences to the program. Table 3.2 gives information about participants' demographics, which was gathered through volunteer information sheets and informal interviews. The program appealed to students, instructors, staff, and community members of all ages.

Lisa was about 40 years old. She lives in Mason City and works as a secretary. She enjoys gardening, reading, and music. She participated in the Spring semester and met regularly with Rosa.

Joan was approximately 35 years old and is employed as a nurse. In the Fall, she only met once with her partner, Rosa.

Pam was about 19 years old. She is a single, full-time student who enjoys being with friends, caring for her pets, and running. She met in a group with Lynne, Teresa, and Ana during the spring program.

Jessica was approximately 40 years old, married, and working as a secretary. Her partner during the fall program was Nho. She enjoyed visiting about families and learning several Vietnamese words.

Jodi was approximately 50 years old, married and employed as an instructor at the college. She enjoys reading, cooking, and spending time with family. During the spring, she met with Maria.

Table 3.2 Mentor Demographic Information

ID	Languages	Gender	Age	Occupation	Marital Status	Sem.	Partner(s)
Lisa	English	F	A	Secretary	S	S	Rosa
Joan	English	F	C	Nurse	M	F	Rosa
Pam	English	F	C	Student	S	S	Luis & Teresa
Jessica	English	F	C	Secretary	M	F	Nho
Jodi	English	F	C	Instructor	M	S	Maria
Tom	English	M	A	Student	S	S	Samuel
Mike	English & Spanish	M	B	Police Officer	S	F	Samuel & Luis
Deanna	English	F	B	Student	S	F	Rosa
Pat	English	F	C	Student	S	F	Eva
Lynne	English & Spanish	F	A	Student	S	S	Luis & Teresa
Julie	English	F	C	Instructor	S	S	Eva
Cathy	English	F	A	Student	S	F	Ana & Teresa
Michelle	English	F	C	Secretary	S	F	Natasha

**Key**

<b>Age</b>	<b>A = 18-24</b>	<b>B = 25-35</b>	<b>C = 35+</b>
<b>Semester</b>	<b>S=Spring</b>	<b>F=Fall</b>	<b>B=Both</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>S=Single</b>	<b>E=Engaged</b>	<b>M=Married</b>

Tom was about 20 years old. He was a student at the college, living in the dormitory at the time of the program. He was interested in a language exchange and enjoys reading books. Due to a busy schedule, he only met with his partner, Samuel, one time during the spring semester.

Mike was in his early thirties. He is a police officer and was interested in a language exchange to improve his Spanish-speaking ability. He met with Samuel and Luis in the fall.

Deanna was a part-time student, in her middle twenties. She lives and works in Mason City and was engaged to be married when she began meeting with her partner, Rosa. When her engagement was broken, she was no longer interested in being part of the program.

Pat was in her middle thirties. She was a full-time student at the college who worked part-time at the school newspaper. She only met once with her partner, Eva, and never returned the coordinator's phone calls.

Lynne was about 20 years old, a full-time student at the college employed part-time at the school newspaper and heard about the program from an instructor. She met in a group partnership with Luis and Teresa.

Julie was in her late forties. She enjoys reading and making crafts. She is employed as an instructor at the college. She met with Eva during the fall program.

Cathy was about 20 years old, a part-time student, and employed almost full-time. She met several times with Ana and Teresa during the Fall program.

Michelle was in her late forties. She is employed full-time at the college and met with Natasha in the fall.

Several others expressed an interest in volunteering. Several attended the informational meeting or visited with the coordinator but later decided not to participate in the program.

### **Orientation and Training**

#### **Student**

The ESL students received their partnership orientation and training in the classroom. The curriculum of the ESL class, in which the students were enrolled, focuses on basic interpersonal communication skills, beginning English literacy, basic understanding of concepts related to money and time, United States history, and democratic government. The course curriculum provides opportunities to communicate in English in the classroom and to learn about the community and region in which the students live.

The Cultural Partners program was developed to contribute to a learning environment that adds to students' language and cultural knowledge while building an appreciation for the native languages and customs that make them unique. Students become teachers through the use of cooperative learning groups. Humor has been an effective tool in this adult ESL classroom, especially when trying to explain idioms. Total Physical Response and breathing exercises, similar to vocal practice, musical training, or Jazz Chants (Graham, 1978) have contributed to a light-hearted, relaxed classroom environment.

The student training and support described above was incorporated into the classroom activities and provided on an on-going basis throughout the semester. During the initial student training, which took place during the ESL class, guidelines (Appendix D) for the class and requirements for the Cultural Partnership program were reviewed and materials, including timesheets and journals, were given out.

Basic cultural orientation activities utilized during the course included using a map of Mason City to practice giving or receiving directions and to become familiar with the location of popular attractions in the town. Cultural awareness issues, such as ways to greet people and the type of questions and topics that are generally acceptable to ask in a conversation, were discussed. Other in-class discussion topics related to partnerships ranged from current local and national events, to social norms at restaurants or in church-related activities. Throughout the program, students' questions were discussed individually or within the classroom when possible. Questions on new vocabulary, social and cultural issues, and other topics brought interesting and relevant discussions to the ESL classroom.

## **Mentors**

### **Spring**

During the spring program, six people attended an informational meeting in order to learn about the program. One person decided she was not able to commit to the one-hour meetings each week at that time. The five other volunteers reviewed the orientation (Appendix E) and training materials (Appendix F). Participants completed an evaluation form at the end of the session.

After brief introductions were made, the discussion and activities focused on reasons for participation, second language acquisition theory, program guidelines (Appendix E), and ESL student goals. Expectations were discussed and basic student background information was presented. Participants were given a folder containing guidelines and record-keeping materials, including journals (Appendix G) and time sheets (Appendix H). Journal entries consisted of 8 ½ x 11" sheets of paper with reflective questions printed on them. Mentor journals contained

paper with reflective questions printed on them. Mentor journals contained questions like "How comfortable were you with the topics and discussion today?" were intended to bring out affective comments while other questions were seeking information about the topics, cultural differences observed, interests, and language-related issues that came up in that days meeting. Participants were asked to allow at least 15 minutes for journaling after meeting with their partners and were told the program records would be used for program evaluation and development.

Follow-up training sessions were planned in the spring program. However, because of busy schedules, meetings were held individually as time allowed, if at all. In brief individual meetings with three participants, the communicative approach to language teaching/learning was talked about. The zoom principle of improving pronunciation by shifting focus "from overall effectiveness of communication, to a specific problem, to overall effectiveness of communication, and so on" (Firth, 1994, p.173) was discussed. The effect of perception and expectations on what we hear in conversations was also looked at. The individual sessions ended with questions and answers.

### **Fall**

None of the spring mentors were available to mentor again in the fall. Seven new mentors were trained for the fall program. Three mentors attended the fall orientation. Guidelines, expectations, and record-keeping requirements were once again reviewed and communication strategies were discussed. For the four participants who were unable to attend, orientation and training were held informally. These volunteers received the guidelines and journal folders after short orientation meetings with the coordinator. One week after the two-hour training session (or after meeting individually with the coordinator), partners were introduced

to each other in the ESL classroom. They spent time getting to know each other and arranged future meetings according to their schedules.

The second training session during the fall program was held as scheduled, with the same three volunteers in attendance. This session was designed to focus on language learning more in depth.

Each participant shared an experience with "unwritten rules" of normal conversation that native English speakers learn by observing family, friends, and community members while growing up. Examples of challenges that caused communication breakdowns unrelated to language and culture, such as a noise from traffic driving by or telephones ringing, were discussed. This led to a discussion of adjustments native English-speakers make when talking with non-native English speakers (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1990, p.125). The group was aware of "foreigner talk," modified input which may help students learn "structures and form" of language (Pica, 1994, p.508). They were encouraged to keep their conversation as natural as possible; if they observed themselves using "foreigner talk," they were asked to think about whether or not it seemed to be helpful at that moment in communicating. Since foreigner talk can limit the type of speech non-native English speakers hear, volunteers were told that it is both necessary and beneficial for their partner to hear them speak naturally at times, without any attempt to modify their speech.

An important emphasis for participants was not to feel the need to "teach" their partner. In class, students would learn about English and practice using it; with their partner, they would actually use it. While there was no need to correct every



error, participants were asked to point out mistakes that interfered with understanding the meaning of the conversation or sounded rude or offensive.

Because stress and intonation patterns differ among languages, the significance of word stress, how stress affects the meaning of words, and the use of rising or falling intonation of a sentence were discussed. Paraphrasing, repetition, consciously balancing the amount of listening and speaking for each partner, and being aware of nonverbal cues received were suggested as communication strategies that could be useful to improve communication with their partner. Participants were encouraged to use these strategies to negotiate meaning and to repair communication or verify mutual understanding (Pica, 1994).

Cultural examples of differences that have the potential to create misunderstandings were used to talk about nonverbal communication. Participants had examples from their experiences and role-played nonverbal signals to look at the importance of gestures and space requirements (Genzel & Graves-Cummings, 1994). We had a discussion about the importance of both nonverbal signals and context clues in understanding a speaker.

Ideas for activities and discussion topics that may be of interest were shared, with the note they should remain flexible within the conversation, just as they would with any other friend or family member. Only the initial introductions and a closing celebration were planned for participants; partners arranged their weekly meetings according to their schedules.

### **Description of Meetings Between Partners**

Initially, partnerships were created on the basis of volunteer information sheets, interviews, student self-assessment forms, and student comments in class. Partners with similar hobbies or language interests were easy to pair. Two NIACC volunteers, Spanish and psychology students who were friends, asked to meet as a group with their partners. A married couple from the ESL class also preferred to meet together, since one spoke very little English. This match was an easy decision. Other partnerships were made by considering language ability, age, gender, participant experience, and interests.

Meetings between partners were held in a variety of settings, including homes, shopping malls, restaurants, art museums, gymnasiums, movie theaters, the NIACC campus, and at church-related activities.

Both partners were asked to choose topics to talk about each week. Participants were encouraged to choose topics in advance to help students prepare. Flexibility was also recommended to allow a natural flow of conversation. Each partner was given a list of topic suggestions, but they were not required to use the list.

### **Maintenance**

During the twelve weeks that partners met, phone calls, personal meetings, and letters were used to stay in contact with partners. Participants were asked to return a comment card after the first half of the program. This was another opportunity for participants to make comments and to ask questions or voice concerns.

At the end of each semester, ESL students planned a special potluck for the final meeting and invited their mentors to be guests of honor. During the spring potluck, sandwiches and beverages were provided by the researcher and the students brought other tasty ethnic foods to share. Students were given participation certificates at the picnic. In turn, students gave hand-written thank you notes to their partners. Journals and final evaluations were turned in at this meeting. The Cultural Potluck for the fall semester was originally planned for December 8, but was postponed to the spring because of the Christmas holiday season. An open house potluck was held for the entire class in the ESL classroom.

### **Evaluation**

Using surveys, informal interviews, and end of program evaluation forms (See Appendix I), volunteers rated their experience in the program in several areas, including support, training, personality match with partner(s), and their perception of the value of the program for themselves and partners.

Several evaluation forms were used. Mid-program comment cards were sent to participants in a monthly letter. Participants were asked to share a comment, question, or concern they had. Program evaluation forms, used each semester, asked questions about the level of support participants received, comfort level interacting with non-native English speakers, quality of training sessions, and ways in which the participant's expectations were (or were not) met. These were distributed at the potluck in the spring and by mail in the fall.

## Summary

The Cultural Partnership program brought together students and mentors from around the world, currently living as neighbors in northern Iowa. Participants brought a wide range of interests, ages, professions, and levels of education to the program.

Cultural Partners continues to be offered for ESL students in Mason City. It is currently funded through a local church and service club by a grant which pays for a local business to coordinate the program, provide student and mentor training, and a organize a recognition luncheon after each twelve week partnership. This program provides support for around 20 partnerships and budgets for 40-50 hours of coordination time (not including the initial start-up planning which has already occurred), 8-10 hours preparation for training and 6-8 hours with participants together in training sessions. Time is allowed for planning before each new program and evaluation during and at the end of the partnership periods.

The development and coordination of the key elements of the program revealed insights into benefits and challenges that occurred on many levels. It is hoped that these insights, which will be discussed further in the final chapters of this paper, will be a resource for future program development and improvement.

## **CHAPTER 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter is a report and discussion of students' and volunteers' reactions to the program. After an overview of the number of participants, students' self-assessment forms and informal comments will be discussed. This will be followed by a report of the volunteers' reflective journals and informal comments offered by mentors. Discussion of the benefits and challenges of the Cultural Partners program, as discerned from researcher observations, the student and mentor reports listed above, and evaluation forms, will follow. The chapter ends with conclusions and suggestions for future study. Recommendations for program development are discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Results**

Fourteen students and thirteen mentors participated to form 13 partnerships in this study. 6 of the pairs and one group met regularly and were reported to have met their expectations met. 2 met at least three times and were able to meet some participants' expectations. In one of these, the mentor was very busy and soon realized she did not have the time to commit to the program. In the other, the student moved back to her home country after she broke off her wedding engagement. 4 partnerships met only once. Busy schedules were the reasons for two of these failed partnerships. One mentor called to say she was quitting because of a circumstance in her personal life; the other mentor never responded to the coordinator's phone calls.

Students wrote goals during the ESL class and were asked to keep reflective notes in a journal. Questions were provided as a prompt for reflection and loose-

leaf paper for notes was included in participant folders. Students were told they could write in the language of their choice and that the journals would be used to evaluate and improve the program. At the end of the program, none of the students shared their journals with the researcher. When they were asked to turn their folders in, only one student did and she had not written in her journal. In this open enrollment, adult education class, it didn't seem appropriate to require students to return folders. They may not have written in them or may have felt their entries were too personal to share. Therefore, the information from students was gathered only through student goals, which were discussed and written in class, informal discussions, and self-assessment forms. Recommendations for facilitating student journaling are presented in Chapter 5.

### **Self-Assessment Forms**

One measure used to collect data on students' perception of their own progress was the self-assessment form. There are many formats available for self-assessment forms, which may include written response, oral, multiple choice, or a Likert-style ranked scale. The form designed for this program was seen as an easy-to-use written tool that could be administered in class with a group of students, while still allowing for simple evaluation and reporting of the responses.

Self-assessment forms can be effective as goal-setting, instructional, and information gathering tools, although some of the questions in this study could have been better phrased. Several statements were too explicit while others elicited information that needed to be clarified. For example, to avoid confusion, instead of mentioning one specific local or national newspaper, it would have been better to

refer to newspapers in general. Also, the Likert scale should have included a "not applicable" category for cases in which students did not have any experience with the particular point being queried.

The self-assessment process was also a learning tool, designed to raise students' awareness of their ability to communicate in English. Self-assessment (SA) involves the learner in the direction of learning. The self-assessment was used to raise student awareness of their current abilities and to provide insights into students' perceptions of their strengths and needs. The act of completing the self-assessment involves students in their learning and helps the instructor or trainer to build on what students currently know.

SAs can reveal information related to student's level of grammatical, pragmatic and socio-linguistic competence. Because of the inter-relatedness of these competencies within the SA, this measure is not reliable as single measurement. However, combined with writing samples or other forms of assessment depending upon the assessment purpose, SAs can contribute valuable insights for language teaching.

The SA form consisted of 10 different "I" statements, listed in Table 4.1 related to using English in different environments or situations. The environments chosen for this program's SA process were chosen to relate to life experiences that students might discuss or participate in with their mentors. Students were asked to agree or disagree with the statements using a 5 point Likert-style scale ranging from

strongly agree to strongly disagree (See Appendix A). The middle column, "no opinion," was intended to serve as a choice for situations that did not apply to a student's life. However, "Not applicable" may have been a better title for that choice in each statement.

**Table 4.1 Student Self-Assessment "I" Statements**

---

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 1  | I am able to speak English comfortably at work.                  |
| 2  | I can talk with a doctor or nurse in English about my health.    |
| 3  | I feel comfortable asking for directions in Mason City.          |
| 4  | I can easily read road signs.                                    |
| 5  | At the grocery store, I can read food labels in English.         |
| 6  | When I am shopping, the clerks can understand my spoken English. |
| 7  | I can read the Mason City Globe Gazette.                         |
| 8  | I speak English comfortably at work.                             |
| 9  | I can order food off the menu at a restaurant.                   |
| 10 | Speaking English is important to me.                             |
- 

The pre-SA data was shared in summary form with mentors to help them understand student goals and perceived abilities. An identical form was used at the beginning and end of the program to identify changes in the students' perceptions of their ability to communicate in English.

Of the nine ESL students participating in the partnership program, four students completed both the pre- and post- SA forms and five filled out only one form because of either beginning the (open-enrollment) class late or leaving before the end of the program. First, an overview of responses to all of the pre- SA statements will be discussed, grouped by related topics. Next, the responses of the



four students who answered both the pre- and post- assessment will be examined to discern any changes in attitude.

### **Self-Assessment Statements**

The statements and student responses are discussed here in the same general order as they appeared on the assessment form. Several statements that relate to similar topics have been grouped together. Responses from the five students who completed only pre- SA statements are included in this overview of all pre- SA forms.

The first statement was "I am able to speak English comfortably at work." Five students disagreed with this statement, including three who are not employed. The three employed students that responded "No opinion" may feel they have achieved basic on-the-job communication skills. Only one student agreed that she is able to speak English comfortably at work. Teresa, Ana, and Natasha strongly disagreed with the statement but they are not employed outside their homes. They may view their work in the home as their job or they may have been unsure of how to respond. This statement may cause confusion for students who are tourists and homemakers.

A statement about speaking English at work was included twice on each form with slightly different wording. Having a similar question on the same form was intended to check for reliability in student's responses. Only one student, who completed only the pre- self-assessment, responded differently to the two questions related to speaking English at work on the same assessment. She disagreed with the statement "I am able to speak English comfortably at work" but agreed with "I

“speak English comfortably at work.” It is possible that the difference in her responses is related to her interpretation of the statements. She may have been thinking of her level of proficiency in response to the former statement and a perceived level of comfort in the latter. Challenges related to this SA form and suggestions for constructing an SA form or improving an existing form are made in Chapter 5.

### **Informal interactions**

Students reported feeling comfortable and able to communicate in everyday settings, including asking for directions and ordering food in a restaurant. Four students agreed or strongly agreed they were comfortable interacting in the former setting and five indicated agreement with the latter. However, in the more specific settings of the doctor’s office and work, only one student was confident in her ability to communicate. Three had no opinion and five disagreed or strongly disagreed about feeling comfortable in these environments.

Insights from these statements are limited for several reasons. It is impossible to know, without further clarification from each student, whether the response refers to the level of comfort, a cultural value, or the student’s level of proficiency interacting in those situations. For example, a student may feel comfortable asking for directions but not be able to understand responses or information gathered during the interaction. Or, they may feel uncomfortable because of a belief about the appropriateness of asking for directions. One’s discomfort could also be caused by a limited proficiency in the target language.

## **Reading**

Four statements related to reading ability in different settings. These statements were designed to provide insights into the types of reading students were comfortable with. Students agreed most often that they were comfortable reading in environments they frequently encountered. Six were comfortable reading road signs, seven reading food labels and five reading menus.

The statement, "I can easily read road signs," prompted a wide variety of responses. This was one area most students felt confident. Four students strongly agreed, two agreed, two disagreed with that statement in their self-assessment, and one had no opinion. Since so many did indicate comfort in this area, this indicates that students do travel or drive often. As with the statements related to work, this one may not be relevant to students without driver's licenses or those who don't drive.

Only one student strongly agreed that she could read the local newspaper. Three indicated no opinion and four disagreed. Since the newspaper is a source of information and news related to the community, developing a pragmatic competence in locating information in a paper may be beneficial to students. However, this statement can be misleading because many north lowans do not read the local paper and there are state and national newspapers available to read.

All of the student participants who only completed the pre- self-assessment, save one, strongly agreed that speaking English was important to them. Nho, who is married to a US citizen had no opinion on that statement and never commented

on her reasons for learning English in class. Through her participation in class and with her partner, she did appear to be very motivated to learn English.

The responses to the initial self-assessment provided information about students' perspectives on their ability to communicate in various environments. Despite the limitations described above, SA can be a simple, practical way to gather initial information on student attitudes and perceptions related to language learning. Sharing this information in summary form with mentors during a training session can help mentors understand the needs and goals of their cultural partner more deeply. With student's permission, sharing the pre-SA responses with the mentor may also be very useful.

#### **Pre- and Post- Self Assessments**

Four participants completed both the pre- and post- self-assessment. Their responses can be seen in Table 4.2. The changes in their self-perceptions will be discussed in the following paragraphs. Several interesting and relevant insights about the student's perception of changes in their ability were revealed in students' responses on the forms.

Three of the students that completed both forms, had stated in class that one of their goals was to improve their ability to communicate in English at work. All three indicated, through changes in their choice on the 1-5 scale, that they perceived themselves to be more comfortable using English at work after participating in the Cultural Partners program. One student has even traveled to other states for her employer because of her ability to communicate in English. (The fourth student is not employed.)

### Table 4.2 Student Pre- and Post- Self-Assessment Responses

	Luis		Samuel		Rosa		Teresa	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Statement								
1	5	5	3	2	3	2	5	NR
2	5	5	3	3	3	3	5	5
3	3	1	2	2	2	2	5	5
4	1	1	1	2	1	2	4	5
5	2	1	2	2	2	2	4	5
6	3	2	3	2	2	2	5	5
7	5	4	3	2	3	3	5	4
8	5	5	3	2	3	2	5	5
9	3	2	2	2	2	2	5	2
10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5

Key	1 = Strongly Agree	2 = Agree	3 = No Opinion	4 = Disagree	5 = Strongly Disagree
1	I am able to speak English comfortably at work.				
2	I can talk with a doctor or nurse in English about my health.				
3	I feel comfortable asking for directions in Mason City.				
4	I can easily read road signs.				
5	At the grocery store, I can read food labels in English.				
6	When I am shopping, the clerks can understand my spoken English.				
7	I can read the Mason City Globe Gazette.				
8	I speak English comfortably at work.				
9	I can order food off the menu at a restaurant.				
10	Speaking English is important to me.				

Only two students' self-assessments suggested an increase in comfort level communicating in the doctor's office. Since no mentor journals or in class comments referred to medical situations as discussion topics, it is possible that they did not hear very much medical vocabulary through this program. However, the statement may have been biased for several reasons: students may not have needed medical care during the program or may have held different cultural beliefs relating to medical care.

Three students perceived themselves to be more able to ask for directions in Mason City. One student felt he had greatly improved in this area. Initially, he strongly disagreed with that statement but agreed, on his post-self-assessment, that he was now able to ask for directions.

Comparing the fourth statement on the pre- and post- self-assessments, two students, very interestingly, felt their ability to read road signs decreased. Informally, they reported that they were referring to signs of street names rather than traffic signs in the second assessment. One student revealed an increase in her perceived ability to read road signs and the newspaper. However, she was unable to complete the self-assessment without it being translated into Spanish. While her reading proficiency level in English was not improved by participating in the program, she acquired a pragmatic competence, related to finding information in a newspaper and finding her way around town. This observation could also be the result of a combination of other variables, such as her length of stay in the community or experience using a newspaper that was unrelated to her partnership.

The two statements related to students' perception of their ability to interact with personnel of stores or restaurants were "When I am shopping, the clerks can understand my spoken English" and "I can order food off the menu at a restaurant." Two students' self-assessments reveal perceived improvements in others' ability to understand their spoken English at stores and in restaurants. The two other students perceived themselves to already be able to communicate in these settings initially and did not feel there was any change in these settings.

Only one student indicated a change in the statement “Speaking English is important to me.” Initially, all students responded in agreement with that statement. The woman who responded that the importance of English had decreased for her, was helped by her husband, who translated the pre- self-assessment statements for her. She may have been marking her self-assessment based on her husband's answers or expectations, or may have been expressing a belief that for her, at times, speaking English is important, other times not. She and her husband are presently vacationing in Mexico and their future plans are unknown. This may also have been a reason for the change in the importance she placed on speaking English.

#### **Informal Comments**

Data from the ESL students was also recorded informally through conversation with the teacher researcher and the comments shared in class throughout the semester. Students reported improvements in their ability to communicate comfortably and confidently in social situations. Students commented that their pronunciation had improved and they felt better able to understand when people were talking to them unless the person began to talk too quickly.

One student reported feeling isolated before the partnership program for several reasons, including her limited ability to communicate and having to care for a baby. Another student commented she wanted to meet with a partner because she felt homesick and had few opportunities to speak with others.

The amount of nervousness students reported about speaking varied depending on the setting in which students described speaking. In more specific

contexts or situations that required specialized language, students felt more nervous. Going to the dentist was much more nerve-wracking than going to the bowling alley.

The students asked more questions in class on a wider range of topics than before the program began. Students learned vocabulary in authentic settings and discussed those experiences informally in class. Students who were not participating in partnerships had access to a wider range of vocabulary and discussions because of those discussions. Students felt they were more familiar with the community and those who live in it.

Students' perceptions of their ability to communicate and the comments they shared about their experiences are important to this study. Because much of the learning in partnerships occurs in informal settings, student comments provide insights into their beliefs about the value of the interaction with their mentor. Mentor journals and informal comments will be discussed in the next section.

### **Mentors' Reflective Journals**

Mentors kept reflective journals. Blank, loose-leaf paper was included in participant folders and sheets with questions were provided as a prompt for reflection (See Appendix G). The eight questions are listed in Table 4.3. Journals written by the mentors provided insights into the perception of participants and a log of activities and topics discussed in this chapter. There are a great variety of activities and events described in the 7 journals that were returned.

The entries varied depending on the personality, interests, needs and insights of the journal's author and the student. Also, the degree of friendship felt



**Table 4.3 Volunteer Journal Entry (See Appendix G)****Meeting Date and Location****What topic(s) did you discuss today?****How comfortable were you with the topic(s) and discussion today?****Describe how your partner appeared to feel about this topic(s).****What are some of the cultural differences you identified?****Was anything from the training session particularly useful today?****Did any language issues, like grammar or pronunciation come up that you tried to explain to your partner? How did that go for you? For your partner?****What was the most interesting thing you remember about today's meeting?****What other comments would you like to share about your experience interacting with your partner?**

by the mentors influenced the tone of their journal entries. This section summarizes journal comments relating to cultural variables, topics discussed, affective variables including age, personal involvement, and attitudes. Comments related to the language exchange, tutoring, challenges observed, and program training are also discussed.

The type and amount of cultural knowledge accessible to students depends on many variables, including age, marital status, languages spoken by friends and others in the student's social group, employment status, community involvement, and length of time in the community. The activities partners chose to participate in affected the type of cultural knowledge the student learned and may reveal attitudes or perceptions partners held toward each other. For example, while one set of partners shopped from a Saks Fifth Avenue catalog, another pair went to a local second-hand outlet store. No judgment is intended by this comparison of activities

chosen by partners; it merely points to a range of experiences shared between partners.

Conversations about customs, festivals and holidays were common. Stories about immigration and relocation were shared. Partners also shared information about their home country, including geography, history and current local events. Work and vacations were also topics of discussion. Eating out at a restaurant or cooking at home brought about discussions of food preparation, meal customs, and etiquette. A few of the hobbies participants described include playing games, gardening, attending car shows, and appreciating art.

Personal life events were frequent topics. For example, families were discussed in all partnerships. Activities often related to social roles of family members, such as “traditional” housewife tasks, child rearing, or respect for the elderly. Partners often met their partners’ families, either in person or through photo albums.

The importance of families was apparent. Family life, family expectations, and even pets were discussed. One partner told how her family members expect gifts from her now because she is an American and her family believes “Americans are rich and can buy anything.” Another joked with her partner about having a pet zebra in Poland, her home country.

Age differences appeared to have an effect on partnerships. One mentor, who was at least 30 years older than her partner, expressed an almost parental concern for her partner’s well being twice. When her partner shared a feeling of isolation, she tried to help her meet people her own age through local youth and

college groups. Another issue that evoked a parental concern from this mentor was work related. The student described paying 10% of her paycheck to her supervisor. It was reported to coordinator because it sounded suspicious. After talking to the student in her native language, it was more clear that this payment is a legal part of her employment contract which provides support services related to immigration and training.

Comments shared reveal different levels of interpersonal involvement between partners. Several mentors referred to the connections they had or formed with their partner. One described an instant common bond felt because she had been born in Yugoslavia and could understand a few words from her partner's native language. Another expressed a connection that went beyond the volunteer partnership to friendship. Still another stated she'd miss her partner's "kind words and gentle ways." Friendship may also be implied by mentors who discussed events that had occurred since the previous meeting with their partners.

Mentors were asked to describe how their partner appeared to feel about topics and the discussions. Mentors commented that their partners appeared comfortable, empathetic, or "not overwhelmed." Several intermediate ESL students were described as happy, eager to speak, outgoing, and positive. One partner, who had a lower level of English proficiency, was initially described as shy and withdrawn; later, he was reported to have opened up a little, even though he didn't speak much.

Mentors also commented on their attitudes and emotions related to conversations. Most mentors reported feeling very comfortable about the

atmosphere and topics of discussion. One topic that was difficult to talk about was the death of a pet. In that example, the partner was also fond of pets so it created a common bond.

Of all the partnerships, in both the Spring and Fall, four volunteers combined the cultural experience with language learning through a language exchange. In these partnerships, each partner had the opportunity to practice speaking in a second language. Mentors had the potential to experience some of the benefits described for language learners. One mentor, who was a student in a Spanish class, reported in his journal that he felt he learned more than a "textbook could have taught."

Some partners viewed their role as primarily tutorial. "I was surprised at how well my partner could speak. Prepared topics didn't seem necessary." "Some (pronunciation) patterns and expressions I don't comment on. For example, my partner often says 'In this situation...' I suspect she won't do this as much as she becomes more fluent. I do correct things that are clearly wrong. I'll rephrase what she said and if she doesn't repeat it, I ask her to." The partner said the student was friendly and easy to talk to even without prepared materials. These comments reveal the mentor's tutorial view of the partnership.

Another partner also made reference to "tutoring" in her journal. One mentor reported that the student appeared to understand things that were said in their first few meetings better than she could speak. She described her partner as shy. After a few meetings, with the help of a phonetic translation book that presented English through the phonetics of her native language, she began to repeat words for

practice, ask questions related to pronunciation clarification and word definitions.

The partner reported it was fun to see her progress.

Responses to the question about the most interesting thing the mentor remembered about the meeting also provide insights into cultural knowledge learned by mentors through close interpersonal interaction with a person from another culture. One mentor learned about corruption in the government of his partner's country. Another learned that in Russia, her partner wouldn't think of acknowledging strangers, even with a smile or nod of greeting. In northern Iowa, it would be considered rude by some not to smile and acknowledge them, even if they were not personally known.

Partners reported that finding time to meet caused the biggest obstacle. Busy schedules were a challenge reported by most participants. One person stated that with several other weekly commitments it was difficult to fit in one more and that when their established routine changed, it was easy to stay off track.

Miscommunications caused several misunderstandings about meeting places and times. Other reasons for not meeting included illness, work, family obligations, school obligations, and differing values placed on "timeliness."

Mentors were prompted to make reference to the training sessions in their journals. One mentioned a greater awareness of the need to slow down the speed of her speech at times, but not necessarily increase the volume. Another discussed the topic of communication breakdowns with her partner and they agreed to tell each other when they didn't understand something that was said. One commented that she realized that just because her partner could recite the alphabet, she didn't

automatically have spelling and the letters down. One reported being able to recognize progress in her partner's use of verbs.

While the reflective journals provided insights into activities, mentors' thoughts and mentors' perception of students' thoughts, the final comments shared by the mentors are also revealing. The mentors enjoyed the program and learned more about another culture than they anticipated. They felt they were able to contribute to their partner's education and enjoyed a friendship they would not have otherwise had. Both groups enjoyed the relaxed, one-on-one interaction with a partner. One partner did suggest having several group activities during the program so all partners could get to know each other. Several said they hoped to keep in touch with their partner after the program.

On the evaluation form (See Appendix H), participants reported that the orientation and support they received was helpful. Several commented that they relied more on past experiences than anything they learned in training, but that the information on language learning was beneficial and the objectives of the program were clearly explained to them. Participants felt they learned about the lives and experiences of their partners and felt their expectations had been met.

### **Conclusions**

This program produced preliminary evidence for the perceived benefits and challenges that were discussed in the literature review. The following pages present the conclusions suggested by data gathered through this partnership program, including benefits and challenges that may impact the student, mentor, classroom teacher, sponsoring organization, and community. Recommendations

for further study are also included because the observations from this partnership program should not be used for generalizations to all settings in which conversation partnerships exist.

### **Benefits**

There are benefits to students, mentors, teachers, schools, and communities in language and conversation partnerships. Journals and informal comments showed evidence of the benefits which were stated in the literature review, including general language support, tutoring on specific subjects or topics, cross-cultural orientation, integration into school and larger communities and improvement of oral communication skills. Analysis of mentor's journals, informal comments, and researcher observations provide evidence that other benefits to mentors and ESL students exist.

Social benefits to students who have limited access to native English speakers were realized. Students felt they were more able to understand and participate in casual conversations. Anxiety about speaking in English did not greatly diminish for all students as a result of the program but students did report a greater understanding of the community, which made it easier to relax in social settings.

Close interpersonal interaction with a native English speaker provided access to language input in a safe environment. A level of trust between partners was suggested by the topics and types of discussion, such as questions about a payment made to a supervisor, shared advice about child rearing, and joking with each other. As mentioned in the literature review, this trusting relationship is a

necessary condition for higher level thinking. Since no higher level thinking or learning occurs when a person experiences an intense emotional response, such as stress, fear, or embarrassment, the safe environment created between partners provides benefits to both the student and mentor.

Partnerships give learners an opportunity to both receive and produce comprehensible input. In settings such as talking with friends at church picnics or ordering food from waiter in a restaurant, students observed communication strategies that were used by their native English-speaking partner when communication broke down. Interacting in a partnership added context to vocabulary students learned. Students learned and practiced new vocabulary in authentic settings, which provided a context to increase retention of the material and hopefully made the vocabulary more interesting and meaningful to the student.

Mentors reported feeling that lifelong friendships had been formed out of this meaningful experience. Since the completion of the study, very little interaction has taken place between any partner, according to reports from students. Reasons for the limited interaction have not been studied.

Mentors gained an opportunity to understand another culture and learned about the lives of immigrants and resident aliens living in northern Iowa. Intercultural or cross-cultural interactions can be psychologically intense. Mentors also benefit from the safe environment, described above, which allowed them to interact with a person from a different culture in a less threatening forum. By developing a relationship with their partner, the mentor had the opportunity to explore his or her



own beliefs and perceptions. This experience took place in an environment that allows and encourages higher level thinking.

Several mentors reported that speaking with a person whose knowledge of English is limited require good listening skills and communication strategies in order to create a shared reality. Also, participants reported that they came to appreciate their own culture and felt they better understood cultures around them because of talking with their partner. Through this close interpersonal interaction, mentors learned about another culture and became more aware of their own language use and communication style. This interaction provided a foundation for intercultural understanding between participants.

The cultural differences identified by mentors indicate that both mentors and partners gained insights into an unfamiliar (or less well-known) culture. Ways of greeting strangers, accepting kindness and showing respect for others, and traditions surrounding holidays were a few differences mention in journals and discussions. Mentors felt the close interpersonal interaction with a non-native English speaking member of their community was beneficial to both themselves and their partner.

The language program may experience greater student satisfaction and retention if experiences related to the ESL class are seen as meaningful by students. Each semester, students have asked to have Cultural Partners again. Adult learners in an open enrollment class will not return if the class doesn't appropriately meet their needs and expectations. A partnership program is a way to

connect learning in and outside of the classroom, while increasing student satisfaction.

Having students participate in a partnership also provided several benefits for the teacher. It provided an authentic way to bring new concepts into the classroom. Even students who were not participating in partnerships gained access to a wider range of vocabulary and discussions. The cultural knowledge they gained through those discussions may increase opportunities to interact with others in the community.

One of NIACC's strategic goals is to increase the effectiveness of the college experience as preparation for life in a global society. The instructors and students who participated in this program experienced the global nature of their own community first hand. They spent over 150 hours meeting, sharing stories, getting to know their partner better, and learning about another culture. The volunteer coordinator spent additional hours researching, developing, promoting, and coordinating the program. This program created opportunities for participants to experience and prepare for life in a global society. It has the potential to make a significant contribution to efforts to achieve a strategic goal, such as the NIACC example.

Mentors and partners can become ambassadors within the community who build a foundation for intercultural communication in businesses, churches, and larger communities. This conversation partnership program provided benefits on many levels.

## **Challenges**

The Cultural Partners program faced challenges on many levels, also. This section will begin on the individual level, then look at organizational level challenges.

### **Students**

The busy schedules of mentors were confusing for students. They did not want to inconvenience their partners yet felt very disappointed when their partners couldn't make a meeting.

One mentor came across as very insensitive to her partner when she left their first meeting saying she would call to set up another meeting but never did. The student reported wondering about the partner for weeks before finally giving up on her. During that same time period, when the teacher would ask partners how the meetings were going, this student did not say anything for several weeks. The mentor avoided the teacher on campus and did not return phone calls.

Students enjoyed learning about the community but would have liked to meet with other mentors and partners from time to time. Several students commented that it was sometimes hard to have a conversation one-on-one and there were times they would have liked to listen as part of a group, rather than have to try to carry on a conversation.

Beyond the self-assessment forms and in-class goals, data on student perceptions in this study was limited. As stated earlier, none of the students shared a journal with the researcher. Several times during the program, students were asked whether or not they had any questions about their journals. Only one student

asked for clarification of one of the questions. Students may not have kept a journal, may have felt their writing was not good enough, or may not have wanted to share them because of the personal nature of the content. By providing more support for student writing and using in-class comment cards while the program was meeting, more primary data could have been obtained from students.

### **Mentors**

Partners reported that finding time to meet caused the biggest obstacle. Busy schedules and meeting conflicts were reported by most participants. Miscommunications caused misunderstandings about meeting places and times. Other reasons for not meeting included illness, work, family obligations, school obligations, and cultural differences. One person stated that with several other weekly commitments it was difficult to fit in one more and that when their established routine changed, it was easy to stay off track.

Personality mismatches, unforeseen personal circumstances and scheduling conflicts also created challenges that prevented several partnerships from meeting the entire twelve weeks. In one partnership, the student returned to her home country and her mentor was disappointed and hurt by the loss of a new friendship.

### **Sponsoring Organization**

Funding is a challenge facing many programs. Programs "staffed" by volunteers still require financial support. According to participant evaluation forms, this project was able to provide quality service; however, it is well worth noting that even this small project required more time and energy than was anticipated. The coordination and support that is recommended for mentors and students requires a

significant investment of time and support. Some challenges may have been created by limited financial resources for marketing, staffing, and administration, as well as a shortage of available mentors.

Administrative assistance, such as copying, binding, and space for holding trainings on campus, was provided and the ABE Coordinator approved the Cultural Partners program. An ABE State Staff Development Practitioner Research grant was received for the spring semester. However, neither program received financial support from the college. Although college students and instructors participated in the program, there was disagreement about the value of the benefits received by the college. Cultural Partners was seen as a small program, primarily serving individuals who were not enrolled in credit classes. By inviting more students, faculty and administrators from the organization to participate on the planning committee, the potential value of the program could have become more widely recognized.

Several students who entered the class after the program began were not able to participate because of a limited number of native English speaking volunteers. Three of the students who were not able to participate in the partnership program did not return to class. These cases demonstrate potential implications on retention of students. It is natural for life circumstances to interfere with a student's participation in class but can be perceived as discriminatory when a particular program is not available to them. The challenge of having a limited number of volunteers may be minimized by being well prepared in advance, involving many people in planning and recruiting, recruiting volunteers from a

variety of organizational, civic, and community groups, and by allowing ample time for the recruiting process.

Retention of students may not be an issue in larger cities where students who wish to enroll in ESL classes must be on a waiting list for a period of time. In northern Iowa, many immigrants are either unaware that the ABE class is available, are at a more advanced level than the beginning level class, or are learning English through immersion from family and friends. Other immigrants choose to interact with people who speak their native language, learning only enough basic English to survive in the community.

The impact of Cultural Partners on retention in this program appears to be positive. The number of students enrolled in the class grew to its highest level since the 1970's. This could also be the result of demographic changes, as well as factors such as the classroom environment.

Although the Adult Basic Education program is sponsored by NIACC, students who take ABE classes are not enrolled in for-credit classes at NIACC. Three NIACC international students, who are enrolled in for-credit programs and speak a language other than English natively were referred to the program. One of the students was interested in being a mentor. With the other two of the students, it wasn't clear whether they came to be mentors or with an interest in participating as students. After talking with them briefly, it became apparent they were looking for tutoring partners and that the goals of Cultural Partners weren't accurately explained by the person who made the referral. After an orientation to the class and the program, the college students decided not participate in a Cultural Partnership.

This problem could have been avoided had the issue of non-native English speaking NIACC international student participation been raised during planning or, at the very least, before the students came to the ESL class orientation.

### **Summary**

Conversation partnerships can provide access to cultural knowledge and interaction with a native speaker, while providing mentors an opportunity to improve their communication skills, learn about another culture, and deepen their appreciation of the diverse cultural tapestry of our community. However, the experiences aren't always positive; in fact, exploring the discomfort one feels when facing change in a safe environment is another benefit of conversation partnerships. Programs need to be developed, promoted, managed, and evaluated by responsible individuals and organizations to avoid or overcome challenges which partnership programs present.

The reflective journaling, student self-assessment, teacher observations, and informal comments in this study showed that benefits and challenges exist on many levels in conversation partnership programs. Cultural Partners had an impact on participants, programs, and communities. Despite the challenges, students in the ESL class continue to ask if the partnership program will be held again. Because funding and support for new programs have not been available through the college, a local service club and church are sponsoring a partnership program during the fall. Recommendations which can help future programs have positive impact on all levels will be presented in Chapter 5.

There are limits to this study which prevent this from being used to make far-reaching generalizations. Small numbers of participants, in a rural setting, in a community with many small town attitudes will have an effect on participant and researcher perspectives. The data gathered on the benefits of the program from ESL student participants were mainly limited to informal comments and observations, since only four of the nine responded to both the pre- and post self-assessment and student journals were not available. The coordination of the program was entirely voluntary as part of this research. While there was administrative support, limits on the researcher's volunteer time may have contributed to some of the challenges related to training and follow-up.

### **Future Research**

Funded by a local church and service club, Cultural Partners continues to evaluate each program and collect data relating to coordination of the program, student and mentor training, and potential effects of participation on participants. Several key questions that are or need to be addressed in future studies of this program or any learning partnership program will be identified in this section.

Further study is needed to evaluate the relationship between the class curriculum and partnerships. Partnerships appear to have value as a supplement within educational programs. A balance of classroom instruction with informal partnerships seems to be very effective. How do partnership programs function effectively without a language classroom component? Should partnerships be included as part of a course curriculum or a school's program? What effects do a partnership have on teacher interaction with students in the classroom? What are



the short term and long term effects of partnerships on student learning? And, what is the effect of language learner and mentor variables such as personality, cultural norms, participant schedules, goals and needs, on partner interaction?

Future studies could look at partner interactions to determine factors that contribute to learning. It is possible that interpersonal interaction with partners could lead to early fossilization, a slowed or frozen development of language acquisition that is less than native-like. Partnerships could affect fossilization by minimizing the need for a language learner to attend to form once communication with a partner is achieved in a way that would not necessarily be "target-like form" (Pica, 518, 1994). Additional study is needed to answer the question of whether partnerships could lead to fossilization and how that might be avoided.

Conversation partnerships and exchanges could provide a forum for researchers seeking to identify the balance between form and meaning that is most conducive to helping achieve language learner's goals. Partnerships could be the "different sort of classroom" Pica suggested is necessary for further study of the effect of second language learning outcomes (1994, p. 521). Partnerships could provide interesting opportunities for linguistic, discourse, and comprehension analysis such as those by Brock, Crookes, Day and Long in the late 1980's.

The interaction in partnerships could also provide insights into interpersonal communication across cultures. A person may not feel his or her definition of "self" challenged as much in this friendly, low-pressure setting. Benefits and challenges to both partners should be examined more closely in future studies.

## **CHAPTER 5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING THE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS**

Recommendations for future program development and future research are discussed in this chapter. While broad generalizations should not be made on the basis of this small study, the insights gained through this study can nevertheless serve as a resource for new and existing programs.

### **Planning and Administration of Program**

Administrative and technical support is important to the success of partnership programs. One way to build that support is to involve people from different levels or departments of the organization in the planning process. When planning the program, it is important to look for various types of support, including financial resources, administrative assistance, interdepartmental participation, and program approval.

Administrators and teachers need time to observe and learn the value of partnerships. Strategies for establishing and maintaining partnerships can be developed by observing successful programs and identifying different levels of organizational support that contribute to the programs' success.

There are several resources that are available to help with planning and administration of conversation partnership programs. Especially valuable resources include *More Than a Native Speaker* (Snow, 1996), the *Talk Time Handbook* (Bentson & Mitchell, 1995), *Culturally Speaking* (Genzel & Graves-Cummings, 1994), and *The Whole World Guide to Culture Learning* (Marshall, 1989). These books contain sample guidelines, job descriptions and suggestions for activities.

A handbook or set of guidelines for the program is an essential tool for communicating with participants. Guidelines should be clearly organized and include program expectations and requirements, a summary of orientation information, program goals, and basic second language acquisition or cultural awareness information. A list of conversation topics, activities, or area restaurants can be beneficial for those participants who like structure. Yet, participants should be allowed to be flexible in their conversations and activities so they don't feel limited by a list and can negotiate changes as needed. Guidelines should be specific about the amount of time each week participants are asked to contribute, including activities such as training, meeting with partner, journaling and record keeping. Partnerships should be set up for a specific length of time to ensure that participants are clear about the amount of time they are dedicating to the program.

Self-assessment forms can help with goal-setting, instruction, and data gathering within limits. Self-assessment appears to be highly appropriate in programs designed for adult learners when used to involve students in their learning or as one of multiple assessment measures. When designing self-assessments, one should include statements or questions that are related to the goals of participants and the program. The questionnaire in future programs or studies needs to be carefully constructed and even piloted on a small sample to make sure that the questions are eliciting the desired information.

Design of the form should also include consideration of the levels of reading and language comprehension of the students or mentors that complete them. Content of statements should relate to program goals, the purposes for choosing

self-assessment as an instrument to gather data, and specific subjects or content that will be relevant to the students who will be self-assessing their abilities, knowledge, or level of skill.

In developing a partnership program, one should plan ahead to ensure that appropriate records will be kept. Participant data can be gathered through information sheets (Appendices B & C). A diversity self-assessment quiz could prompt deep discussion in mentor training session by offering an opportunity to reflect on beliefs and values. Monthly time sheets (Appendix H) and journals provide valuable information for efforts to receive grants or other types of funding.

Student and mentor journals (Appendix G) and evaluations (Appendix I) are a valuable source of information and ideas for future programs. ESL students may require additional support to facilitate journaling and student feedback. Allowing 15 minutes during each class for student writing, encouraging participants to journal together, or using in-class comment cards may provide more consistent student feedback and journaling. Participants can be asked to share topics, experiences, and suggestions through the journal, evaluation sheets, or informal sharing. Participant feedback should be an integral part of partnership program development. A means of gathering and utilizing participant suggestions should be included in the design of the program.

### **Publicity and Recruitment**

Recruitment announcements should be shared through a variety of media in many different classes, organizations, or community groups. Students, staff, instructors, church members, and community members are a few potential groups

of volunteers. Press releases can be sent to school newsletters and community newspapers. A brochure to share with potential participants, committee members, administrators, and other stakeholders might also be helpful.

The program should be publicized in creative ways. Nominating mentors for volunteer recognition awards so the program can be recognized within a larger audience. Some mentors are motivated by extrinsic rewards and may feel more likely to volunteer again after such recognition. Take out an advertisement in a leisure section of a local newspaper. Another creative way to share the program may be through participants' stories. If they are willing, students can be asked to share their experiences in an interview. Invite news reporters to participate in the program or interview participants who are willing to share their story. It is important to remember that confidentiality of participants is a right that needs to be carefully observed. Language learners may have various feelings about their involvement in the program. The range of feelings could vary from proud and excited to nervous and embarrassed. They need to feel safe with their partner in order to lower affective filters that could inhibit learning.

The screening of volunteers is an important step of recruitment. Volunteers complete some type of information sheet. Information from this sheet may or may not need to go beyond basic personal data and goals or expectations. An interview with the potential mentor is one way to get to know the participant.

Some qualities to look for in language mentors may include experience with second language learning, an interest in cultural activities or travel, and an outgoing or tolerant personality. Other positive volunteer motivators include a desire to help,

a social need, a sense of citizenship, cultural expansion, religious devotion, interest in the work of the organization, professional development, or a sense of responsibility (McCurley & Lynch, 1989; Bentson & Mitchell, 1995). Ideal volunteers use their skills in accordance with policies and guidelines of the program, are willing to complete required training, and try to remain flexible. They perform to the best of their ability, are courteous, safe, able to respect participants' right to confidentiality, and willing to provide advance notice when unable to participate for any reason.

Screening is a way to minimize potential legal ramifications that could be brought upon the sponsoring organization due to poor management. Becoming aware of participants' goals and reasons for volunteering makes it easier for the coordinator to make placement decisions and utilize participants' skills.

Participant safety is a consideration in making placement decisions. A student's level of proficiency in the target language impacts the type of partnership that should be made. For example, an ESL student who cannot communicate well in English should be in a group with peers and friends or should be paired with a confident, trustworthy mentor who can interact in the student's native language.

### **Orientation and Training**

Orientation and training are essential parts of the support needed by students and mentors. Orientation, which includes a review of guidelines, a chance to meet other participants, and time to ask questions and share expectations, will meet participants' basic needs. Training and follow-up provide additional support.

Orientation should be provided outside of the class time, unless the program is a requirement of the class. A program overview, discussion of guidelines, and suggestions can be provided in class if all students in the class have the opportunity (or choose) to participate. Student training and support that is presented for the benefit of all students may be provided in class or in separate sessions, depending on the number of participants and course objectives. Vocabulary, discussion topics, and on-going support should not only be provided during classes and training sessions, but also must be available to individuals outside of the classroom.

In this study, student journals were not available. To help students with journal writing and to ensure that this type of data will be available from students in future programs, it may be beneficial to include time for journaling in class. Prompts or reminders from the teacher may not be enough to encourage or facilitate language learners' writing. Encouraging mentors and students to journal together can be another way to support student writing, if it doesn't draw away too much from the time intended for conversation. However, writing together could create a time consuming or stressful situation for mentors with poor writing skills or a lack of training in the teaching of writing. Also, participant entries could be affected when a participant knows their partner will be reading it.

During the orientation, if not before, both mentors and students need to be made aware of the commitment they are making. Additional meetings which they are expected to attend, such as trainings, should be conveyed to participants when they make contact with coordinator during orientation (and possibly during the recruiting stage) in order to increase attendance and minimize problems later.

Mentor training sessions should provide program orientation, basic second language acquisition knowledge, and strategies for interpersonal and intercultural communication, and cultural awareness activities. Training sessions can include activities and information that the trainer and/or coordinator feels comfortable with. After introductions and a “warm-up” activity, the program guidelines can be reviewed as a group. Also, allowing discussion time during the initial meeting is a valuable way for the coordinator to understand needs of participants, and enables volunteers to get to know each other and share ideas.

With the ESL student’s permission, information shared through a pre- self-assessment may give mentors general insights into their partner’s perception of his or her ability to communicate in English. Having this information may contribute to the overall experience of the learning partnership for all participants.

Providing volunteers an opportunity to look at their own “unwritten” rules of communication during the training session can be interesting and insightful. After discussing conversation topics, partners should be encouraged to keep conversation with their partner as natural and spontaneous as possible. Topic suggestions can offer an initial conversation focus but the choice of topics to discuss should be allowed to flow. Volunteer training can allow participants to role-play ways to pace conversation without either partner dominating the natural flow. This can provide the volunteer an opportunity to improve interpersonal communication skills.

Mentors should be allowed plenty of time to examine their assumptions about people who speak languages other than English or who belong to cultures other



than a "mainstream U.S. American" culture. Because our actions are shaped by our beliefs, assumptions about student needs or wishes can effect partnerships. A student who has an interest in interacting with native English speakers doesn't necessarily give any indication of his or her degree of integrative motivation. (In fact, several students that participated in this program have returned to their home country.) However, if the student's mentor believes all ESL students want to assimilate into mainstream U.S. American culture, the interaction in the partnership may actually contradict the goals of the student, the ESL class, and the program.

Cross-cultural activities during training can help participants become aware of their own cultural expectations and how that may differ from their partner. Discussing one's own culture and expectations may help participants understand and recognize differences in their partner's culture. It can also provide information mentors may want or need in order to more effectively interact with their partner. Follow-up support may include trainings, individual or group meetings, phone calls, and letters. Training and support is vital to creating a positive experience for all participants! It is important not to underestimate the amount of planning time prior to training and to remain flexible during the training in order to respond to unexpected questions and allow the discussions to possibly flow in unplanned directions.

Follow-up training sessions are important because they provide opportunities to raise questions, share experiences, and check participant's expectations and attitudes toward the program. We know from adult learning theories and brain research, that a one-time training session without follow-up is almost meaningless.

If it is only possible for participants to attend one training session, the materials can be combined into one longer session, supported by follow-up meetings or phone calls from the coordinator to give participants an opportunity to ask questions, clarify concerns, and communicate with the coordinator.

Mentors should be invited to observe or volunteer in the ESL class. This can be a learning experience for both the students and the mentor. For example, both the class and Cultural Partners training emphasize the belief that language and culture teaching can be done in additive ways rather than minimizing the value of either partner's native culture. Mentors may more fully understand the teacher's philosophy after seeing the teacher interact with students.

### **Maintenance**

Once partnerships have been formed and partners have been introduced, the coordinator's efforts should turn to maintaining the program. Follow-up trainings, small group meetings, and participant recognition are important ways of supporting participants. A phone call or letter from the coordinator may increase participant motivation. The amount of structure to partners' meetings and follow-up contacts will depend upon the parameters required of the setting and type of organization in which the program is operating.

In this study, partners arranged their meeting times and places. Some referred to a list of suggested places to visit, which was provided by the coordinator. Others felt this was unnecessary and made plans for meetings without relying on suggestions from the coordinator. One caution worth noting is that there may be valid reasons for providing guidelines related to where meetings should or should

not be held. In this study, all participants were known personally by the coordinator or were employees of the college. On a larger scale, it may be wise to suggest that partners meet only in safe, public places until mentors and students know each other well enough to decide whether or not to invite their partner into their home. Since the ESL student's ability to communicate in English may be limited, programs bear some of the responsibility for participant safety.

Volunteers appreciate recognition for their participation. From a simple thank you to a special event honoring participants, a program that provides support and recognition for participants will find the road to long term program maintenance an easier one to follow. Student participants should also be recognized as volunteers, since they are sharing wonderful learning opportunities and a cultural experience with their mentor.

### **Evaluation**

Evaluation forms, or comment cards, are essential tools that should provide insights into needed improvements in for programs. An evaluation scale provides statistical feedback that is easy to analyze while forms that ask participants to write comments (Appendix I) can provide more in depth information. No matter which type of form is chosen, programs that attempt to meet the needs of participants must remain flexible about incorporating comments and suggestions into program plans and objectives.

This study focused on program level evaluation. It would also be worthwhile to have some method of evaluating partners and partnerships in order to help insure a more enjoyable experience for participants. For example, a partner who

consistently disregards the time structure by being late or missing meetings is not meeting participant or program goals relating to the structured interaction between language learners and native English speakers. There could be many reasons for tardiness or missing meetings, which may exist from personal to cultural levels. Regardless of the cause, this, or other similar actions, impacts the experience of the program for their partner. Finding out during the program about this type of situation could minimize or prevent problems related to cultural expectations or norms of behavior, thus increasing the value of the partnership as a learning opportunity. End-of-program peer evaluations would also provide valuable information for future pairing decisions.

### **Conclusion**

This study has shown that conversation partnerships can bring many benefits to language learning programs. While there are many aspects of partnership programs that require more research, this research project offers a general overview for new partnership program development and improvement efforts within existing programs, which can be found in educational, workplace, and community environments.

It is safe to say that bringing ESL students and native English speaking mentors together in a partnership program offers potential social, linguistic and cultural benefits to both language learners and mentors. Interactions between partners that are based on mutual respect for cultural differences can offer personal development opportunities, enhance self-esteem, create lasting friendships, and

improve communication between people who identify with, or have grown up in, different cultures.

The diversity that exists in our schools, businesses, and nation is one of the strengths of our society. Communication and respect for the differences that make us individuals are tools that can help us create unity through diversity. Cultural Partners is a way of sharing these tools with people who care about the communities that shape their lives, and who are looking for positive ways to understand themselves among others.

## APPENDIX A. SELF ASSESSMENT FORM

### ENGLISH SELF ASSESSMENT Volunteer Conversation Partner Program Spring 1996

I am able to speak English comfortably at work.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



I can talk with a doctor or nurse in English about my health.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



I feel comfortable asking for directions in Mason City.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



I can easily read road signs.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



At the grocery store, I can read food labels in English.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



When I am shopping, the clerks can understand my spoken English.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



I can read the Mason City Globe Gazette newspaper.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



I speak English comfortably at work.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



I can order food off the menu at a restaurant.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



Speaking English is important to me.

Strongly Agree Agree No opinion Disagree Strongly Disagree



**APPENDIX B. STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET****Student Information Sheet  
ESL Cultural Partners**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ (optional)      Sex Male Female

Phone (home) \_\_\_\_\_ (work) \_\_\_\_\_

Have you gone to school?    yes    no

If so, what is the highest grade you completed? \_\_\_\_\_

What time would you prefer to meet?

mornings      afternoons      evenings      weekends

Do you have transportation available (car/bus)?    yes    no

What languages do you speak?

\_\_\_\_\_

What special interests or hobbies do you have?

\_\_\_\_\_

What do you hope to learn from this experience?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Placement Information \_\_\_\_\_

Date

Partner name

Special notes

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C. VOLUNTEER INFORMATION SHEET

### Volunteer Information Sheet Cultural Partners

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ (optional)      Sex   Male   Female

Phone (home) \_\_\_\_\_ (work) \_\_\_\_\_

Education (Mark last year completed)

8      9 10 11 12      13 14 15 16      Masters      Doctorate

What time would you prefer to meet?

mornings      afternoons      evenings      weekends

Do you have transportation available?      car/bus

What languages do you speak?

\_\_\_\_\_

What special interests or hobbies do you have?

\_\_\_\_\_

How are you interested in volunteering?

\_\_\_\_\_ Tutor for non-native speaker

\_\_\_\_\_ Language exchange partner

\_\_\_\_\_ Typing letters/Record keeping

\_\_\_\_\_ Telephone Contacts

\_\_\_\_\_ Helping with potluck

\_\_\_\_\_ Baking

\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

How did you hear about our program?

\_\_\_\_\_

Placement Information \_\_\_\_\_

Date      Partner name/Volunteer Job

Special Notes

\_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX D. STUDENT GUIDELINES

### ESL CONVERSATION PARTNERS SPRING 1996 STUDENT GUIDELINES AND TOPIC SUGGESTIONS

The purpose of this partnership is to provide conversational English for the ESL students at NIACC. A volunteer will meet with you each week between February and May. I hope this will be a rewarding experience and will provide you with unique opportunities to practice English.

This program is intended to be a conversation exchange. You are asked to commit to one hour each week to practice speaking English. Your partner is committed to this, also. How this relationship develops is up to you and your partner, but no one has any obligation beyond meeting to exchange language practice. If you feel your partner wants a closer relationship than you do, talk to them or come to me.

#### TOPIC SUGGESTIONS

Talking about family or hometowns can offer a way to get to know each other. Sharing photos can spark conversation. Other topics can include current local events (political, cultural, or personal), national or international events (Olympics), the weather, personal favorites (music, food, movies). What other things do you want to talk about?

You may want to decide on a topic to discuss in advance so you both can prepare for the meeting. Topics being covered in class make excellent discussion topics. Repetition will help improve your understanding and speaking ability. I suggest you bring up previous topics. While you may be bored after the third review of the current art exhibit at the MacNider, you will understand more each time you bring a subject up. Repeating topics will give you more chances to bring up questions.

A shopping trip to a department store or attending a sports event will provide wonderful conversation. If you choose an event such as a movie, have a pop or cup of coffee afterward to discuss it. It doesn't take long to forget details and questions you may want to ask.

Your partner may be interested in hearing about life in your homeland. If you don't feel comfortable with a topic, let your partner know. Each culture has its own norms. Because of this, sometimes your expectations may be different than your American partner. If you are uncomfortable with your partner, contact me to talk about options.

## JOURNALS

Your records are an important part of this project. Notes on discussion topics, location, your opinion of the rapport between yourself and your partner, and observations of your improvements will be invaluable when I complete my final project evaluation and report..

Take your journal folder with you to each meeting. Besides topics and observations, feel free to include your feelings or any impressions that you would like to share. Please take a few minutes before and/or after each meeting to review notes and add to your comments. I am the only person who will read your journal notes.

## MISCELLANEOUS

Try to meet in the same location each week. If you decide to meet at different sites, travel together or make sure everyone writes down the place and time for the next meeting to avoid misunderstandings.

Sometimes it will be necessary to cancel your meeting. Your partner will call if they are unable to meet at a scheduled time. You are responsible for notifying your partner if something prevents you from meeting them. If you don't want to exchange phone numbers with your partner and contact each other directly, please talk to me.

Thank you again for your participation! Please call me if you have any comments, needs or questions. My home phone number is (515) 424-4028. In Ames, my office phone number is (515) 294-6131.

Colleen Hovinga

## APPENDIX E. VOLUNTEER GUIDELINES

### ESL Cultural Partners Fall 1996 Volunteer Guidelines and Program Description

#### Purpose

For ESL students, the purpose is to help them improve English speaking ability and their awareness of American culture. Students will learn about Iowa and the US from a native speaker of English.

As a volunteer, you will have an opportunity for a multi-cultural experience and receive training in second language acquisition. Some volunteers have requested a language exchange with partners who speak a native language that they are studying.

This project is part of a thesis research project through Iowa State University. Evaluation of the training program will serve as a test of the training effectiveness and will indicate needed modifications and improvements for future programs.

Participants will be asked to provide feedback on the training sessions and administration of this program to help with that research and development. Reflective journals kept by participants will demonstrate strengths and weaknesses of the program.

All records will be kept confidential. Your name will not be used in research reports or shared in public in connection with the program. At the end of the program, names will be detached from all documents and journals to ensure confidentiality.

Please maintain your partner's confidentiality. Some language learners feel frustrated or ashamed of their abilities and may not want their participation in this program to be put on display.

#### Time Commitment

Volunteer Training    3 hours each    September 13  
October 4

Partners meet 1-2 hours each week from Sept 15-Dec 8 to share and converse.

One hour for English only partnerships

One hour in English, one hour in Spanish for exchanges

Journals/timesheets    15-30 minutes each week

Survey and Evaluation 20 minutes each

### **Rights and Responsibilities**

Participation is voluntary. You or your partner may discontinue participation in the program at any time for any reason. If you need to discontinue meeting, please call Colleen so a new arrangement can be made for your partner. Do not be discouraged if something comes up that causes your partner to drop out.

This program is intended to provide 1-2 hours of conversation per week. If you feel uncomfortable about the relationship or expectations of your partner, talk to them or Colleen about it. Cultural norms of conduct vary. Discovering them is part of the learning process in this program for both you and your partner.

Record-keeping is important to this study and to the development of future programs. Please ask if you're unsure of what to journal about or where to record your hours.

You have the right (and responsibility) to discuss any questions or concerns you have about the program with the coordinator, Colleen or the ABE Coordinator, Karmen. Colleen can be reached at \_\_\_\_\_ or at her office in Ames at (515) 294-\_\_\_\_. Karmen can be contacted in room \_\_\_\_\_ or called at 422-4\_\_\_\_\_.

Conversation is a two way partnership. We hope this program is a fun, light-hearted experience for you. Thank you for being part of this language and culture sharing program.

Colleen Hovinga  
Karmen Shriver

**APPENDIX F. TRAINING HANDOUT**

**Cultural Partners**

**Volunteer Training**

**September 20, 1996**

**Not to let a word get in the way  
of its sentence  
Nor to let a sentence get in the way  
of its intention  
But to send your mind out to meet the intention  
as a guest  
That is understanding**

**Chinese proverb  
4th Century B.C.**

## **INTRODUCTIONS**

## **GUIDELINES**

**JOURNALS-** all learning builds on prior experience & knowledge  
Reflection: make a decision -> plan -> act -> evaluate and reflect

## **EXPECTATIONS**

## **STUDENTS**

### **I. CONVERSATION "RULES"**

- A. Usually one person speaks at a time.
- B. Speakers change and take turns.
- C. Length of contribution varies.
- D. Cues are given to allow others to speak  
Some cultures pause to allow for turn-taking.  
Americans may expect the speaker to jump in.
- E. Content and amount are unspecified.

## II. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

### A. Learner

#### 1. Paraphrase:

Approximation	
Word coinage	"airball" for balloon
Circumlocution	"Taboo" game

#### 2. Transfer

Literal translation	code shifting
Appeal for assistance	"What is this?"
Mime	non-verbal

#### 3. Avoidance

Topic avoidance  
Message abandonment

### B. English Speaker-Conversational adjustments "Foreigner talk"

#### 1. Phonological

Slower speed  
More stress & pauses  
More careful articulation  
Exaggerate intonation (wide range of pitch)  
Avoidance of contractions

#### 2. Morphology & Syntax

Shorter utterances (using fewer words per sentence)  
Less complex sentence structure  
More present tense verbs  
More questions  
yes and no intonations  
fewer information questions (when, who...)

#### 3. Semantics

Fewer idiomatic phrases  
More use of "Be" verb (copula)  
Fewer pronouns (use full noun phrase)

**4. Content**

Predictable/ more narrow range of topics  
 Here and now orientation  
 Discussion more brief of topics

**5. Interactional Structure**

More abrupt topic shifts  
 More willingness to allow topic change  
 More acceptance of unintentional topic shift  
 More use of questions to change topic  
 More repetition  
     self and other  
     exact and "meaning" (semantic)  
 More confirmation checks/ clarification

**C. Purpose of Communication Strategies**

1. Provide simple comprehensible input
2. Repair conversation after "breakdown"
3. Avoid breakdown
4. Help negotiate meaning between native speaker and non-native speaker
5. Corrective feedback

**III. NONVERBAL SIGNALS**

**A. Distance/ Space**

**B. Hand gestures (Breshnev/ Nixon)**

**C. Facial expressions**

**D. Eye contact**



**APPENDIX G. VOLUNTEER JOURNAL ENTRY FORM**

Cultural Partners  
Volunteer Journal Entry

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Meeting Location \_\_\_\_\_

What topic(s) did you discuss today?

How comfortable were you with the topic(s) and discussion today?

Describe how your partner appeared to feel about this topic(s)?

What are some of the cultural differences you identified?

Was anything from the training session particularly useful today?

Did any language issues, like grammar or pronunciation, come up that you tried to explain to your partner? How did that go for you? For your partner?

What was the most interesting thing you remember about today's meeting?

What other comments would you like to share about your experience interacting with your partner?

**APPENDIX H. PROGRAM EVALUATION FORM**

**Program Evaluation  
English Cultural Partner Program  
Fall 1996**

Did you receive helpful assistance/support during the program

-from contacts with NIACC staff and volunteer coordinators?\_\_\_\_\_

-from the program's Volunteer Guidelines?\_\_\_\_\_

How comfortable were you speaking and interacting with your partner?

Do you feel more comfortable now speaking with non-native speakers of English?

In what ways?\_\_\_\_\_

How useful was the training for this partnership program?

How clear were the objectives for the partnership program training?

What do you know now about the lives of second language learners in our community?

What do you know about learning a second language that you didn't know before?

Were your expectations of this partnership program met? In what ways?

What three topics covered in training sessions were valuable?

What were the three least valuable things covered?

What would you like to have heard more about?

What other comments would you like to share:

*Thank you for volunteering your time as a language partner!*

**APPENDIX I. TIME SHEET****Cultural Partners****Volunteer Timesheet**

Week 1 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 2 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 4 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 5 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 6 \_\_\_\_\_

Week 7 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 8 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 9 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 10 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 11 \_\_\_\_\_  
Week 12 \_\_\_\_\_

**Weeks 1-6 Total** \_\_\_\_\_

**Weeks 7-12 Total** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please initial this sheet and return to Colleen.**

***Thanks for participating!***

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**BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Colleen (Kelly) Hovinga was born March 24, 1968 near Mason City and spent most of her childhood in Bancroft. She was selected to attend the American Legion Auxilliary's 1985 Iowa Girls' State camp and graduated from St. John's High School in 1986. She was the recipient of a Truman research scholarship at Iowa State during her junior year and received her B.A. from the College of Design at Iowa State University in 1992.

After working for several years, Colleen returned to Iowa State to complete her Masters Degree in English. She taught in the Department of English as a graduate student at Iowa State and received an Adult Basic Education State Staff Development grant to fund initial research and development of the pilot program for this thesis.

Colleen was elected Chair of the Intercultural Communication Interest Section of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. in 1998. She is President of Language Opportunities, Inc. and also works part-time as an educational consultant to Northern Trails Area Education Agency. She will be listed in the *International Who's Who of Professionals* 1999 edition. She enjoys living, playing, and working in Mason City, IA with her husband, Jeff.